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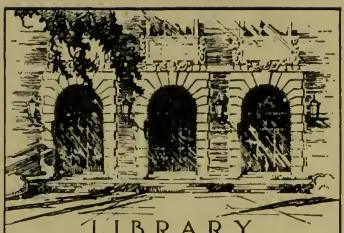

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TIME WILL TELL:

A Story of Society.

By S. W. FULLOM,

AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT HIGHWAY," "FOR LOVE OR MONEY," "THE MAN OF THE WORLD," ETC., ETC.

"The end crowns all,
And that old common arbitrator, Time,
Will one day end it." SHAKESPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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TIME WILL TELL.

CHAPTER I.

IN LOVE.

Annie was neither undisturbed by the presence of Mr. Ravel, nor reassured by his assumed unconcern, which seemed out of character in her father's lawyer. She thought it would have been more natural for him to evince surprise at their rencontre, and seek an explanation of her position. At the same time she affected indifference herself, in order to cover her timidity, and give an impression of confidence in her independence. She was also very guarded in her demeanour towards Alfred—knowing it was a point

that might be mentioned to her father, and could be easily misrepresented. Indeed, she would have walked by the side of Jessie, but Mr. Ravel led his horse in a way to prevent such conjunction, and in this order they reached the camp.

The gipsies were but one family, but it was a family of four generations—the ancestral pair, visible in the recesses of a covered cart—a middle-aged couple, lying on the grass asleep, and, further on, their grown-up daughters, who, like two mulberries on one stem, were lolling in a low tent, their husbands having gone on a tinkering expedition, while around played two broods of children. These last were eight in number, and presented those variations of size which matrons describe as steps of stairs, in this instance ranging from eight years downwards, and through every degree of rags and dirt. They made a dash at Annie as soon as she appeared, and demanded tip, the eldest leading the way, and Annie promised a contribution, if they would consent to be sketched. The prospect of payment would

have won their consent to anything, and they allowed her to group them on the ground, one standing up, another sitting, and the others assuming recumbent postures, when, for effect in a picture, they looked striking enough. Annie instantly began her sketch, and became so interested as to forget, for the moment, her recent trouble.

"Miss Blandford seems to take very comfortably to the position she has elected for herself," observed Mr. Ravel to Jessie. "I didn't wonder at her father leaving her here so long, when he told me she was in charge of Miss Balcombe. I know what confidence he places in *you*."

"I am not here as Miss Blandford's keeper, but as her friend," replied Jessie, rather shrinking from the lawyer.

"And her father's friend, also," rejoined Mr. Ravel.

"Oh, certainly!"

"Mr. Blandford, so distrustful as we must confess him to be, must have known you a long time to feel such reliance on your —your friendship."

Jessie was silent.

"*He has probably been acquainted with you from childhood?*" pursued the lawyer, significantly.

"Did he tell you so?"

"No; but I inferred it from his manner, and the facts."

"What facts?"

"Facts within my knowledge;" and Mr. Ravel half smiled, as if he might be jesting, and yet have a meaning.

"Oh!" said Jessie.

"Pray did you ever hear him mention Mrs. Bailey, or—or Rhoda Pinkerton—for she was known best by her maiden name in his family?" Mr. Ravel looked at Jessie, as he spoke, but she had dropped her eyes, and he might as well have scrutinised a wall.

"During the many years of our acquaintance, you mean?" she answered, sarcastically.

"Precisely."

"You must have a good opinion of my memory, to think I could recollect."

"I imagined there might be circumstances to impress it upon you."

"Really!"

"And there are none? You never heard the name?"

"It is not such a singular name that it would be remembered, unless, as you say, there was something to fix it in the mind. But you have awakened my curiosity. Who is Mrs. Bailey?"

"She was Mr. Blandford's foster-sister. But she is dead, now, and I asked you about her, because she left a daughter, who must be about your age, and I thought—" here he gave Jessie another glance—"I thought—"

"What, pray?" asked Jessie, as he paused.

"*That you might know her*," said Mr. Ravel.

Jessie laughed. "Well, so I might, or so might anybody else. But that is a very bald possibility to work upon. Now I can put you in a way of going straight to the mark."

"I thought I couldn't be mistaken," rejoined Ravel, "and I shall really esteem your co-operation a great service." He smiled,

as he added, "You can tell me where this young lady is?"

"I didn't promise that. I said I could put you in the way of finding out."

"By offering a reward for information, perhaps? Well, I think I could promise a large sum."

"I didn't mean that. What I would recommend is the very obvious course of seeking this information from Mr. Blandford, who, you say, knew her mother."

The lawyer coloured. "Ah! but it may be a disagreeable subject to Mr. Blandford," he said; "in fact, I believe it has painful associations for him. But I am allowing the attraction of your conversation to detain me from pressing business. I hope opportunities will occur for making us better acquainted; for I trust I may venture to consider myself one of your friends:" he raised his hat, and taking a hasty leave of Annie and Alfred, rode off.

Jessie remained stationary. It was plain that Ravel suspected who she was, and, for some purpose of his own, wished to establish

the fact, without compromising himself with Mr. Blandford. Directly she discerned his hesitation, she made it a weapon of defence, and her apprehensions of him vanished. She was not one to seek difficulties, but her disposition was not timid, and once set on a purpose, she kept her way with a stubbornness nothing could overcome. Annie was resolute, but never looked forward, like Jessie; she did what she considered right, without estimating the consequence; and might, on pressure, turn back; whereas, Jessie forecast the worst that could happen, and was ready to work on—straight, if it might be; but if not, by such crooked path as she could find.

Suddenly she emerged from her reverie, and her eyes wandered to Annie, and from her to Alfred, scanning each with an earnest gaze—so earnest that she did not perceive that she was herself undergoing a scrutiny from one of the gipsies, the mother of some of the children, who, creeping round from the tent, had reached the spot unperceived; then, after a glance at Annie and the little

group she was sketching, and another at Alfred, fixed her keen eyes on Jessie. She tried to read the secret of that abstracted attitude, veiled, as it were, by thought; and it might present a not-uninteresting study to one familiar with human weakness. But the thoughts of the heart baffle the wisest, and appearances only led the Sybil astray; for she ascribed Jessie's air and watchful glances to an unrequited passion for Alfred, who was evidently fascinated by Annie, while Annie treated him with indifference. After reaching this conclusion, the gipsy stepped forward, and made Jessie aware of her presence.

"Pretty lady, cross my hand with a piece of silver," she said, in a low tone.

Jessie looked her over; then drew forth a purse, and placed a shilling in her hand.

"Now take off your glove, lady, and I'll tell you the lines of fate," said the gipsy.

"You will tell me a heap of nonsense," answered Jessie, who, though she had so recently been ridiculing the art, now felt a

fluttering in her breast, and did not refuse to unglove.

The gipsy appeared to look searchingly at her hand.

"Is it nonsense to say you will win?" she then said.

"Win what?"

"The man you love," murmured the gipsy, looking up, to watch the effect of her words. And Jessie flushed.

"I say you will have him," the gipsy continued, now persuaded that she had hit the truth, "but it won't be yet."

"I shall have him, when I know him," said Jessie, mockingly.

"You know him well enough. But you're right to be secret, or you might stir up your rival."

"So I have a rival, too?"

"Is that news to you, lady?" smiled the gipsy, though with something of a sneer. "Well, there she stands!"

She made a gesture towards Annie, still watching Jessie, who again changed colour. In fact Jessie was thinking, not as the gipsy

supposed of Alfred, but of Harrifield, and she recalled her fear that Harrifield and Annie might have formed an attachment. The suspicion showed itself in her face, and though this outward sign vanished as it rose, the feeling remained within.

"That will do," she said to the gipsy, "You may now try to get a shilling out of my friends."

She turned her back, and walked a few paces away. The gipsy was satisfied, and glided up to Annie, who had been too busy to notice her approach, while Alfred saw no one but Annie.

"Let me tell your fortune, pretty miss," said the gipsy to Annie, who having finished her sketch, was now rewarding the children. "I'll tell you everything."

Annie shook her head.

"Come, lady, show me your hand," pursued the gipsy.

Annie walked on.

"Give me a piece of silver," continued the gipsy, in a lower voice, "and you needn't mind your hand; for I can see your fortune in your pretty face."

"I will give you nothing, nor do I want to know anything you can tell me," said Annie.

"Listen, miss, and you'll change your opinion."

But here, seeing Annie was annoyed, Alfred interposed, and got rid of the woman, while Annie joined Jessie.

"A pretty beau you are, Jessie, to walk away, and leave me behind," she said apart. "I hope you were not going off altogether."

"Oh, no! I was only playing gooseberry-picker," answered Jessie.

"What office is that, pray?"

"Don't you know? Have you never made the discovery that two are company, and three are none?"

"You can't mean that you left me purposely with Mr. Mockright?" And Annie coloured.

"Mr. Mockright is too near us to be talked about just now," murmured Jessie. "Tell me rather about the gipsy. What fortune has she promised you?"

"Do you think I would listen to her, then?"

"Are you so wise? I thought you talked of faith when we first spoke of the encampment."

"Is it possible you didn't see I was jesting?"

"Truth may be spoken in jest. And as for fortune-telling, remember what Shakespeare says—there are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy."

Annie laughed. "What a turning of the tables," she said. "It is I who am the sceptic now, and you are the believer."

"I only say there may be something in it," smiled Jessie, "and I am a spiritualist, you know. But we shall see what we shall see."

"Yes, as you said this morning, *Time will tell.*"

Here they were overtaken by Alfred, still leading his horse. He ranged himself again by the side of Annie, as he accompanied them on.

"It was very good of you to remain with us, Mr. Mockright," observed Annie. "Only

for you, I am afraid we should have been spoiled by the Egyptians."

"If I have been of any service, I shall feel very proud," replied Alfred, his face brightening, "I only regret I haven't a trap here, that I might offer to carry you home.

"Oh, thank you! we prefer walking. Jessie can go any distance, and she has got me in training."

"Yes, I have put her on a diet of bread and butter," said Jessie, "and you would be surprised at the quantity she consumes."

"That is telling tales out of school," laughed Annie, with a little blush, which denied the impeachment. "Don't you think she is very satirical, Mr. Mockright?—I could almost say spiteful."

"Pray don't go to such extremes," cried Jessie.

"I think it is you who have gone to extremes, Miss Balcombe," said Alfred, gaily. "You must own you use a very meagre diet for training—only bread and butter! The usual staple for pedestrians is raw beefsteaks."

"Exactly," answered Jessie, "and I have followed the rule by analogy, for what raw beefsteaks are to men, bread and butter is to young ladies."

This sally raised another laugh, and they chatted on till they reached the highroad, when Alfred could no longer delay mounting. But, in the saddle, he lingered for another word, and it was with reluctance that he finally rode off.

He had yielded to his admiration of Annie, and it had deepened into a passion, a passion by which he was absorbed, and seemed in a manner transformed. Our great poet says that love prompts nobility even in baseness, and how much more must it regenerate dispositions free from this leaven, though their nobility be hid by husk. Such was the nature of Alfred. His faults were on the surface, and were the effect of habit or example, or grew out of the associations of his home. He had been trained in the opinion that the one thing needful wa swealth, that this thing was his, and that the possession of it both ranged him with the magnates of the earth, and

demanded his scorn for all below. It is true, he had never acted up to the doctrine, but it had been in his mind, even when he exercised the better feelings in his breast; it gave an impress to his bearing, it infected his manners, and begot that assumption of consequence which is the foremost characteristic of a snob. He saw himself in another light in the glass of Annie, confronted by her beauty and humbled by what seemed her disdain. He began to understand that gold was not the only endowment of the world, nor even the most precious; that like the joss of the Chinese, it was often contemned by its worshippers, while such things as talent, character, and personal beauty claimed involuntary respect, which could no more be alienated by poverty than bought by riches. This was little to discover, but it is what is hid from the many, and to him it was a revelation. His manner became softer, and he grew more considerate for others, striving rather to please than overbear, at the same time dropping that air of condescension which had marred his goodnature, although,

in truth it was engendered more by heedlessness than presumption.

How he thought of Annie is not to be told; for it is beyond the grasp of words, or even imagination. Indeed, he did not know himself how utterly he was enthralled. That he loved her with all his heart—that he was never happy but in her presence—that existence would be intolerable if she did not become his: this he fully comprehended. But he was unconscious of the fact that she sat in his breast like a divinity or like a conscience, and not only swayed his reason, but shaped his actions. He knew not that he was ever dreaming of her beauty, of the music of her voice, and the sweetness of her smile, and of her every movement and gesture. He knew not that he recalled whatever she said, to her lightest word, and thought it over, as if it were an oracle. He understood only that she was the star of his life, and that he lived by her brightness.

Jessie's penetration divined his feelings, and, as he rode off, she saw various reasons for interesting herself in his favour. First

his success would take an attraction out of the way of Harrifield; secondly, it might relieve her from the necessity of betraying Annie to her father; and, lastly, she thought the match desirable, and one that would make Annie happy. So she opened the subject as they walked home.

"Do you like that young fellow, Annie?" she said.

"Well, on the whole, I think I do," replied Annie, a little amused at the question.

"Then, I congratulate you on your conquest."

"Now you want to teaze me."

"I am speaking in sober earnest. You can't doubt that he is overhead in love with you!"

"I not only doubt it: I shouldn't dream of such a thing."

"You may dream of it as soon as you like then; for it is as plain as the sun."

Annie put on her grave look.

"I say again I congratulate you," continued Jessie. "He is rich, young, and

goodlooking—not an Adonis, but one to wear. And for you, in the position you have assumed, to win such a man, without any angling or flirting, is a thing to be proud of."

"You are very complimentary, but I wish you wouldn't talk nonsense," replied Annie, growing savage.

"Now listen, Annie," rejoined Jessie, in excited accents, "for, believe me, I am speaking seriously, and all I have said I mean. I could never imagine anybody more in love than this young man is with you." Annie seemed startled. "The question is—and it is one you should weigh well—can *you* love *him ?*"

Annie was silent.

"You are young," continued Jessie, "and I needn't tell you—what you know well enough—that you are very charming; but remember this, beauty is held on the frailest tenure. A girl is a flower one year, and the next may run to seed: so she should marry when she can. I don't prophesy such rapid extinction for you, but there are

some reasons why you should not despise a good offer."

Annie still said nothing.

"You want to be independent of your father," pursued Jessie: "now you know his determined character, and he will certainly, by some means or other, get you in his power, unless you interpose such a barrier as marriage. And my advice to you is, to accept this young man, and I will contrive that you shall be unmolested till the marriage can be effected. If you won't do this—"

Here Jessie abruptly stopped.

"What, then?" said Annie, nervously.

"Why, then, I foresee that you will involve yourself and others in a world of trouble, and, though I shall only offend you, I would again urge you to consider how you are wronging yourself by remaining in your present position—to remember what advantages are offered you by your father, and to return to his protection, while the step will be a voluntary one, and not brought about by him."

"You have now said all you wish?" remarked Annie.

"Yes."

"Well, I have listened to you, and I thank you. I thought you were jesting at first, but I now see you are in earnest, and I see also, and appreciate, your kind intention—only I feel bewildered. Here we are home, and I will go up to my own room."

She knocked at the door, which was opened by Midge; and leaving Jessie in the passage, she hurried up stairs.

CHAPTER II.

OAK HILL.

In her own room Annie yielded to a tumult of feelings, not wholly of an unpleasing nature—not untinged with triumph even, but still troubling. She was, as she had said, bewildered. To know that her attractions have charmed cannot but gratify any woman: to hear, for the first time, that she is loved, is an incident no girl can meet unmoved. Indeed, it often kindles a responsive passion, where there was not a spark before, and love conquers by sympathy. Annie was of a disposition to feel this influence—that is, her heart was open to every appeal; for it was a heart loving and gentle, a little wayward, but ever generous. So she

thought of Alfred with the kindest interest. Now that Jessie had unbanded her eyes, she could not doubt his love: it had been manifested by a thousand signs, and these recurred to her mind, as she sat and mused, and raised little thrills of emotion. It was emotion of a composite character, blending woman's pride with appreciation, quickened by gratitude. She thought of Alfred apart from his defects, as an honest, manly fellow —good-looking, as Jessie had remarked (and Annie thought she might have said *handsome*): she remembered his good-nature, too; and she began to turn him into something different from what he was, something more polished. But could she bring herself to accept him? could she requite his love with her own? Could she become his wife? Her cheek burned under this interrogation, then paled, and flamed again. She had never thought of marriage in this way, never thought of it but in a light spirit—as a prospect, or a hope, or a destiny; and now it was presented to her as a fact and within reach. This changed its aspect, and looking

it in the face, she recognised its solemnity, and trembled at its mystery, though without collecting her thoughts, or forming a purpose.

Whatever the resolution her reverie might throw up, she took no counsel of mercenary considerations. She never remembered Alfred's wealth, nor the certainty of having a luxurious home, and her own carriage, nor even the advantage of being secured from her father. She was above any sordid influence. A little sly she might be, but she could not be mean; and her feelings, if they sometimes stooped, never fell. Her intention was true, and she was always pure in her object, even when it might be pursued by what seemed a dubious course. So if she ever acted wrong, it was to do right, and the dereliction sprang from the moment, not from an opinion that the end justified the means. Hence what some might assume to be deception in her deportment was only reserve: her armoury was not falsehood, but silence, and she had no design in it but her own safety.

Jessie was satisfied that what she had

said to her made an impression, and would obtain consideration; and she did not renew the subject. She felt that Annie would be governed in her conduct by feeling, not argument, so that further discussion would be useless, or useful only for mischief. Her conscience now left her free to act for her own interest. She had done what she could for Annie; and was ready, on any sign of encouragement, to aid her further, and lead Alfred to declare himself. Indeed, she resolved not to give up the match till she had brought this about. The marriage, if it took place, might compromise her with Mr. Blandford, but she trusted to her adroitness to clear herself to him, and there was a possibility that he might be rather pleased at the alliance than offended. What in fact, could he look for more? He might object that Alfred's father was engaged in trade—but did no cloud hang over Annie?

Jessie revolved these thoughts in a troubled breast. Jealousy blinded her to everything but its own aims—aims by which she could not be profited, since she had

no hope of winning Harrifield herself, but by which she was nevertheless enthralled. Her plan was as decisive as simple. Annie's bearing towards Alfred would show whether she had escaped Harrifield's fascinations, and Jessie would then have her cue, and act accordingly; either giving Annie up to her father, or taking measures to secure her marriage with Alfred.

Several days passed without advancing the business. Meanwhile Annie's manner was a puzzle, and baffled Jessie. She appeared thoughtful, but not abstracted; not cheerful, yet not sad; tender, but reserved. This might be love, or it might be hesitation, or it might betoken a foregone preference. What it meant Jessie was determined to ascertain; for she resolved to waylay Alfred, and use him to elicit the truth.

Alfred spent the day in the Temple, where, in the belief of Mrs. Mockright, he was shaping his course for the woolsack; and Jessie learnt that he always came from town by the four o'clock train. She contrived to be on the platform at the proper moment,

and walked the length of the train, as if she were looking for a friend. Apparently she was disappointed, for she hurried away, and quitted the station; but instead of crossing the bridge—her way home—turned to the right. Here a road brought her to a secluded path, running between a hedge and fence, and climbing a steep ascent, which, from a row of oaks on its summit, takes the name of Oak Hill. Her ear was not unaware of a quick step behind, but no feature betrayed this consciousness, when Alfred Mockright came at her side. Not only did she give the impression that she had not the least thought of such an encounter, but she wished him to find a little difficulty of approach. She nearly exceeded in this respect; inspiring Alfred by the force of association, with some of the shyness he felt in presence of Annie, and once he was almost turning back. But love is a potent impellor, and it urged him on. He had already gained a friend in Miss Cottle; if he could strike up a friendship with Jessie, he would, he thought, have won

over the guards, and they might enable him to capture the citadel. So he made his salutation, not forgetting to remove his hat; and Jessie, though taken by surprise—or pretending to be—half held out her hand, but was drawing it back, when Alfred's massive hand made it prisoner. This set him at ease, and he opened conversation on the weather, whereupon Jessie remarked the loneliness of the path, and asked how many people had been garotted there, a topic which, with some laughing, brought them to the hill-top. They came out on a road, flanked on one side by villas, buried in gardens, on the other by the open country, and itself forming a terrace, whence the eye scanned a span of Surrey, Middlesex, and Berkshire, with Windsor's round tower peering in the distance. Ornamental trees bordered the slope, and resounded with the twitter of sparrows, and the notes of the thrush, while a blackbird whistled from a deeper wood. The road opened a turning after some yards, but without terminating, and Jessie kept straight on.

"There is no way out there," said Alfred. "Are you aware of that?"

"Can't I get round to Langley Lane, that way?" asked Jessie.

"No, but you may by the road we have just passed?"

Jessie looked at her watch.

"I am to meet Miss Staunton in Langley Lane," she said, "but she has gone to a pupil on Surbiton-hill, and I dare say I have time to explore this nook."

She stopped as she spoke; for the nook could be surveyed from where she stood, and as she only sought its seclusion, there was no need to proceed.

"I must listen to that blackbird," she said. "Annie is always listening to birds, and I have caught the fancy from her."

"Are you sure you won't be too late for Miss Staunton?" suggested Alfred.

"Oh! that will be of no consequence."

"Isn't she expecting you?"

Jessie smiled. "You are quite interested about it," she said. "But I believe it is more on Annie's account than mine—per-

haps more on your own account. I declare you are blushing, Mr. Mockright! One might almost suspect you were in love."

"Well, what if I am?" rejoined Alfred, desperately.

"I shouldn't like to say, unless you were serious."

"I am as serious as ever I was in my life."

"Then I can only hope the lady, whoever she may be, is deserving of your preference."

"The lady is Miss Staunton."

Jessie looked down.

"You seem incredulous!" stammered Alfred, "are you astonished at my presumption?"

"I am only incredulous."

"May I ask why?"

"Shall I tell you frankly?"

"Pray do."

"Why, then, I think if you were serious, you would have made this confession to Annie, instead of me."

"Do you think I might venture on such a step?"

"Why not? Now don't look so dolorous, Mr. Mockright, or I shall fancy you consider a declaration as equivalent to arranging for your funeral."

"Let me have your kind advice about it, Miss Balcombe. I do love Miss Staunton; I love her so entirely that I believe I shall go mad if I don't win her."

He spoke passionately, his colour changed, and his strong frame shook. Jessie looked away, for she recognised a love like her own, only not so hopeless.

"I am a stranger to you, Mr. Mockright," she said, "and, besides, I am Annie's friend. You should seek advice in such a matter from some one you know better, and who is more disinterested about it than I."

"It is because you are her friend that I feel confidence in you, and ask you what I should do. Pray tell me."

"Well, since you urge me so, I recommend you to go to her, and say to her what you have said to me. Go, now, while you feel the fervour; for now you can speak best. She will be in the lane almost as soon as you."

"Are you not going then?"

"No, I will return home the way I came, and leave you a fair field. Don't hesitate, and don't fear." She waved her hand. "I wish you success."

Alfred went off, and Jessie took the opposite turning, which led back to the station. Oak Hill Grove—for so it was called—ran under the shade of oaks, and preserved the same seclusion as the road above, so there was nothing to disturb her thoughts, and she pursued them as she went. In truth, they were not where she walked, but carried her, in fancy, to the "unseen" lane, where she had sent Alfred to intercept Annie.

CHAPTER III.

LANGLEY LANE.

Langley Lane was a pathway, linking two roads, and an inner path ran along a ledge, sequestered by trees. Here it was that Alfred intended to lie in wait for Annie, but, as Jessie predicted, she arrived nearly at the same moment as himself. The surprise, therefore, was not greater on one side than the other, though Annie looked confused, and she did not grow more composed when Alfred, instead of passing on, turned and walked by her side. They were both silent, and, though she felt how embarrassing it was, she had no power to speak, for her lips seemed locked, and voice and thought gone.

"I wished to speak to you for a moment,"

Alfred said, at length. "I wanted"—he had made up a speech, but remembered neither speech nor compliment, uttering what words came first. Thus he blurted out his love.

Annie made no reply, but this rather gave him courage.

"I love you dearly," he continued, "with all my life and soul. I think of you night and day; I keep you before me wherever I am, or whatever I am doing; and the world has no charm for me but in you."

"Why do you tell me this?" faltered Annie.

"Why do I tell you?" replied Alfred, stopping in his walk, as if rooted to the spot.

But Annie moved on, and even quickened her pace. She hoped to meet Jessie, and hurried towards a wicket, opening into the Hook Road. But here she was overtaken by Alfred.

"One minute, Miss Staunton," he said, imploringly.

She raised her eyes now, and looked in

his face, and he thought her glance expressed reproach. Yet this was blended with a tenderness that took away its sting, and he could see only those amber orbs, bright as sunshine, yet soft as twilight. Her face was flushed, but the glow did not efface its hue of sentiment, lovelier than roses, and how lovely when roses conjoined! Alfred could have gazed for ever, but he felt that he must speak now or all this might be lost.

"You ask me why I have made this confession to you!" he said.

"Yes."

"Is not that a cruel question?"

"I can't think so, when your words oblige me to remind you of the barriers that divide us—your wealth and my poverty, your rich connexions and my isolation. I am not in a position to receive such a declaration, and this you must be sensible of."

"It is a thing I never thought of."

"Should it not have been your first thought?"

"No—I would say no a thousand times. My first thought should be what it is—to

gain your love, to prize you above everything else, to live for you, and—and—" his voice trembled, but the words gushed out—"I could die for you, if there were need."

He looked up, and saw there were tears in her eyes.

"Annie—dear Annie"—and he ventured to clasp, not her hand, but her tiny wrist—"give me one word of love—say you will think of what I have told you."

She shook her head, looking down the while.

"Is it possible you refuse me?" exclaimed Alfred.

"I must," was the almost inaudible answer.

"On the grounds you have mentioned?"

"No—at least, not wholly."

"I tremble to ask if it is because you can't love me."

She made no answer, but he readily interpreted her silence, and it left him without hope. His head became dizzy, a blindness struck his eyes; and before he could see again, she had disappeared.

He remained at the wicket, thinking over the scene, acting it again, recalling her every look and tone, and trying to find some ray of assurance. He had approached the interview in doubt, but it was a doubt that came and went, the doubt of love, which, though it barbs suspense, does not dream of rejection. But now he knew his fate, and one moment changed this holiday doubt to despair: for the instant, indeed, it changed his love to hatred. The more vividly he saw Annie—and he saw her in all the charms she derived from her beauty and his own fancy—the more he thus realised what she was, the more did he think her treatment of him cruel and unjust. The feeling was of the sort that sometimes prompts men to murder their sweethearts—a frenzy, that overpowers every consideration—not free from vindictiveness, yet not desiring vengeance—rather a willingness to be sacrificed, if the sacrifice involve the woman's, preventing her, by this immolation, from wedding another. Love has a mine of such feelings, and they are all animated by this sentiment

—the wish that no other shall possess the partner we covet, however we are shut out ourselves; and the difference in the motive of the sexes is, that men are jealous of the woman they have lost, and women of the rival who wins. So love fired Jessie and Alfred with a kindred feeling from widely different emotions: Charles Harrifield had wronged Jessie, yet her love for him never wavered: Alfred could bring no impeachment against Annie, yet, in the bitterness of his despair, she seemed to him an enemy.

In this whirl of passion he felt a hand laid on his arm, and turning, he beheld Jessie.

"Mr. Mockright, I have spoken to you several times," she said, "but you are—"

She stopped, as she glanced at his face; for this told what had happened.

"You have seen her!" she resumed, in softer accents.

"Do I need to say?" he answered.

"No!" she replied, with more than his bitterness. "Of course, loving her truly, possessing everything to make her happy,

and being all she should desire, you are not her choice. Such are the arrangements of this happy world! We are always at cross purposes. No two hearts go together—all is discord, division, and misery." And her brow knit.

"You call it misery!"

"And is it not?"

"I will tell you another time." And he turned away.

"Stay," said Jessie, extending her hand. "You asked my advice a few minutes ago, and I will give it now unasked. You really love Annie?"

"Love her!" said Alfred, absently.

"Well, you do! Then, don't take her refusal: don't resign her! You may soon be parted—in fact, I believe she won't be here many days; and when she is away—when she is unhappy, as she may be, she will recollect your offer and think of you differently."

Alfred shook his head. "It can't be!" he said. "Good bye!" And he wrung her hand. "You mean kindly, but I know—I

saw! There's nothing to be done." And he strode off."

"This is a man!" muttered Jessie, her eyes following his receding form. "I am only a woman—a wretched, helpless woman, yet I can persist."

But she walked away with a dejected air.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAP.

Annie looked so distressed when she reached home, that Miss Cottle, who let her in, drew her into the sitting-room, instead of leaving her to take off her things. The good spinster, after spending the flower of her life with nothing to love but her parrot, had risen to feel wider and dearer sympathies, and centred them all on Annie. Annie was her idol—indeed, her world. Her timidity shrank from any display of this affection, which seemed a sort of liberty; for, cowed as she was by the world's contumely, she almost regarded Annie as belonging to a superior species. But excitement brought out her love unknowingly, and then she forgot

everything but its object — as she did now.

"What is the matter, my dear child?" she said. "Something has happened?"

"Yes—something that has made me unhappy," replied Annie, sinking into a chair.

"You are not fit for the life you have undertaken and its constant mortifications. We must be disciplined for such a servitude, and you have been brought up so tenderly."

"It isn't that. Indeed, I have met with less rudeness in my teaching than I expected. It is quite another thing, and makes me so feel my separation from mamma—not that I would throw my trouble upon her by telling her of it, but that I should be strengthened by her society."

"No doubt, dear. At your age, no one can take a mother's place. But you have a young friend, remember; and Miss Balcombe may be the better confidante from being rather older than yourself."

"Not in this case, dear Miss Cottle. I can't talk to her of this. It is what I wouldn't even speak of to you, only I know

he will—for Midge has told me that he often comes to you."

"Do you mean Mr. Alfred?" said Miss Cottle, quickly.

"Yes." And Annie's face flushed. "He has just met me, and—and—"

She could not bring out the words, and Miss Cottle came to her aid.

"I see he has spoken to you, dear, and I know how he loves you: it would be impossible to love you more."

"It is that distresses me so. He looked so wretched, when I—"

Again she left the sentence unfinished, and now Miss Cottle did not intervene. She saw what had occurred; and considering that few girls obtained more than one chance in the lottery of marriage, and that many were shut out altogether, she thought even Annie reckless in rejecting so eligible a suitor. Besides, she was fond of Alfred, and, in a kindred zeal for Annie, could have presumed to plead in his favour, if it had not been too late.

"I am sure it will be a great blow to

him," she said, at length; "and I don't know how he will get over it."

"I want you to lighten it to him," answered Annie. "You see it wasn't a time to say I liked him; but I do, very much. And you might say so, if he mentions the subject to you—say that you know I think highly of him, and shall always esteem him. But I have examined my heart, and—and—"

"You don't love him?"

"No."

"It is a pity—a thousand pities. But you are both young. Love might come when you know him better—when you know him as well as I do."

"Impossible, dear Miss Cottle: I tried to let him see that it was so—only I wish him to understand that I appreciate his worth, though I am unable to accept him. I want this said kindly and soothingly to him."

"I see, dear, and I will do what you wish if he gives me an opportunity."

"Thank you, thank you!" And Annie put her arm round Miss Cottle's neck, and pressed a kiss on her cheek. "Now I am more satisfied."

Miss Cottle wisely deemed this the termination of the conference, and went to prepare tea, so Annie had time to compose herself before the appearance of Jessie. She was far from reconciled to her position, but it now seemed more endurable. At first, she had thought of discontinuing her attendance at the Mockrights, in order to avoid the trial of constantly meeting Alfred, but Mrs. Mockright had told her they were going for some weeks to the seaside, which rendered it unnecessary to move in the matter immediately. Indeed, it might be possible to go on as before: for no doubt Alfred would be as averse to a meeting as herself, and would keep out of her way. She did not anticipate interference from Jessie, and resolved to have no confidence with her on the subject, considering that it could serve no purpose, while it would be ungenerous towards Alfred.

Jessie came in almost as much out of spirits as herself. She made no allusion to having missed Annie, and, in fact, through the excitement caused by Alfred, they had both forgotten their arrangement to walk

home together. Nor did they succeed in keeping up a conversation, for each was a little absent, and spoke under constraint. Annie was bent on keeping her secret, never dreaming it was known to her companion, who, on her part, had a secret of her own, though its import concerned them both. In short, she was brooding over her intended treachery, and smiled on Annie, while her bosom raged with jealousy. Hypocrite she had long been, and now her better nature seemed subverted and released from every scruple. She no longer justified her conduct to herself by reflecting that, in the step she meditated, she was acting for Annie's advantage: she did not even consider how it might affect Annie, except in so far as it cut her off from Harrifield, and for this end she would strain every means. Her mind was as blind to reason as honour, and, carried away by her suspicions, never considered whether there was any evidence of Annie entertaining a preference for Harrifield. The notion had seized her imagination, and she became reckless whither it

might lead her, so long as she achieved her design.

Thus she passed two days of dissimulation, and two restless nights, fomenting the bitterness of her soul, and revolving her plans, pondering and dreaming, and still deceiving. On the third day she decoyed Annie into a walk, and led the way up the Hook road, Annie's favourite resort, and one of the prettiest outlets from Surbiton. The opening of the road is flanked by elms on one side, rising from a strip of bush, and forming an arch over the footpath, while the other side is bordered by a wooded meadow, having the appearance of a park. Further on there is clear ground on both sides, here growing crops, with a back of interlacing trees, there the same park-like meadow, while the road mounts a hill, commanding views into Middlesex and Berkshire. Clusters of oaks and elms crown the summit, and, just beyond, the left hand opens the wicket to Langley Lane, while a fine avenue of elms stands on the right, and affords an approach to a farmhouse. Here we catch sight of the

Surrey hills, with the slopes of Epsom downs; while the intervening expanse, though presenting little diversity of level, has a charm for the eye in its range of field and hedge dotted with wood. The wicket of Langley Lane reminded Annie of her parting with Alfred, and she looked away, with a sensation of pain, all the agitation of the moment recurring to her memory. Nor did Jessie pass the wicket unmoved, though her emotion was of a different character, and far deeper, springing not as Annie's did from spmpathy, but from wounded passion. She had just been hesitating in her designs against Annie, remembering their friendship, and yielding to the innate kindness, which so often neutralised her faults. But her jealousy rekindled at sight of the gate; all her suspicions revived, and once more she surrendered herself to their guidance. She had, indeed, already arranged everything, and could only have drawn back at the risk of a quarrel with Mr. Blandford. But this was not what impelled her on, nor did it even enter her mind. She was influenced

solely by her own feelings, feelings which a single moment had poisoned, and turned from sweet to bitter. Her mood now led her not merely to repress her returning tenderness for Annie, but to regard her with a momentary hate, to which she gave expression by presenting the associations of the spot in a distorted form.

"What a nice place for a meeting of lovers," she said, in a satiric tone. "They might stand at the wicket there, and spy anybody coming a mile off, or they can go ever so far back among the trees, if they want to be billing and cooing. Or it is a place where a girl might turn her back on a man, and jilt him."

"You draw a pretty picture altogether," replied Annie, nettled.

"Yes, it would do as a sketch for a fancy fair, and I am sure would fetch a good price. First, a stolen meeting, a boarding-school miss, talking nonsense with some Lothario, giving him her whole heart, poor goose, and keeping a look-out right and left, for fear of being caught by mamma; then the couple

among the trees, swearing in kisses, and next week repeating the performance with other partners; lastly, the heartless or thoughtless woman casting off a true man in order to chase a shadow."

"Your sketch is all from one point of view," said Annie. "You might introduce a true woman, cast off by a heartless or thoughtless man. Such things have been!"

"Really!" said Jessie, lightly, but wincing.

Annie saw that she considered the remark an allusion to herself, which was far from her intention.

"Why do we talk of such things?" she rejoined gently: "they only make one sad."

"What else have women to talk about, unless it is dress or scandal?" answered Jessie.

"You are out of humour to-day, or rather in one of your glooms, and I am determined not to encourage them, so I shall let you complain unanswered."

"You call it complaining to speak the truth. You want to believe that everything

is pleasant: and because I have discovered the contrary, and speak according to my experience, you think I am a grumbler. You may live to taste life's bitterness yourself, or, at any rate"—and Jessie spoke with some emphasis—"you may inflict it."

"You are getting severe," said Annie, colouring.

"I can change my tone, and promise you will be all honey. If your eyes are killing, they can restore to life; and as for your mouth, I am sure it was made for kissing."

"I could say the same of yours," rejoined Annie, provoked, "only you use it so much for biting."

"That is well put. You are improving under my tutelage, and I shall soon have to take lessons from you."

"There is only one thing you need be taught, Jessie."

"What is that, pray?"

"Charity."

"Oh! that I can learn any day. I shall come to the proper age in a few years, and

then I will join a Dorcas society, and acquire the whole mystery."

They had now reached the turnpike, where the way was crossed by another road, leading on one hand towards Tolworth, and in the opposite to Long Ditton; and Jessie turned in the latter direction. The conversation had become disagreeable to Annie, and she allowed it to drop, and looked round on the view as if it diverted her attention. There is no better spot for scanning the Surrey hills, the ground being high, and the country open in that quarter; and pleasant grounds lay on the right, where the path, girded by a span of sward, borrowed shade from a line of firs. A pretty rural road it was, and every step added to its rusticity, till, passing a farmhouse and some cottages, it grew quite sequestered. Presently it sank into a hollow; tall trees flung over their boughs, and a recess afforded room for a thicket. Here Jessie broke silence.

"I enjoy this spot, it is so horribly lonely," she said, "just the place where one

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would expect a highwayman, if we lived in the time of our grandmothers. Let us stop a minute, Annie, and take it in."

"You urge such an exquisite reason for stopping, I can't refuse," answered Annie.

"Your dialect shows it reminds you of the forest of Arden. Well, we may fancy ourselves Celia and Rosalind."

"I could sooner fancy you Jaques, in petticoats."

"I am determined to be Rosalind, in breeches."

"You force me to laugh, though I am almost inclined to quarrel if I had a pretext."

"Let us invent one," cried Jessie. "We will quarrel *about Charles*"—and she fixed her eyes on Annie, who looked puzzled: "Rosalind's lover, you know; Charles the Wrestler."

"You are in a nice confusion," rejoined Annie. "Rosalind's lover was Orlando."

They stood still during this colloquy, and it so amused Annie, that she did not heed the sound of approaching wheels, and it was

only as these rolled passed that she glanced round, and caught a glimpse of a close carriage. This, to her surprise, stopped a few yards further on, causing her to look round again, when the carriage-door flew open, and she was confronted by her father.

CHAPTER V.

RECONCILIATION.

The sudden appearance of Mr. Blandford startled Annie, tinging her cheek with a flush, which, though prompted by disquietude, heightened her beauty. Her father felt a thrill of pride, as this met his eye, and he advanced with a determination to win her affection.

"Annie, my child, how glad I am to see you!" he said, and slid his arm round her waist, and pressed a kiss on her lips.

It was the first time he had been so demonstrative. Annie had expected reproof, and was not only surprised, but moved.

"And I am glad to see you, papa," she answered.

"Are you indeed? That is pleasant to hear: and certainly it shall not be my fault if you are ever otherwise. Miss Balcombe, too!" And he gave Jessie his hand. "This is a happy meeting."

Jessie could not say it was unexpected; so merely replied by a smile.

"I can't blame you for running away, Annie, since I find you in such good company," resumed Mr. Blandford. "Nay, don't be disturbed about it"—and he patted her changing cheek: "we will say nothing of what has gone by, but think only of the future."

"You will find Annie deserving of every happiness you can procure for her, sir," observed Jessie.

"I am sure of that; and I shall now carry you both off, and see what I can do in that way. Come, Annie."

He motioned towards the open door of the carriage, but Annie remained stationary.

"Pray go," murmured Jessie: "it will be better."

"Now, what are you waiting for?" said Mr. Blandford, in his gayest manner.

"I wish to live with my mamma," answered Annie, hesitatingly.

"I will take you to her."

"It will be inconvenient for me to go on such sudden notice, papa. My disappearance from Surbiton will seem so strange, unless I make arrangements about it."

"I can do all that for you, Annie," suggested Jessie, aside, but intending Mr. Blandford to hear. And to him she turned before Annie could reply. "I must ask you to excuse me for a few days, sir," she said. "I have things to settle before I can leave Surbiton, and I will undertake Annie's arrangements at the same time."

"That is very obliging of you," replied Mr. Blandford. "And pray take this with you, as you may have to pay some of Annie's debts of honour." And he presented a purse.

"I have no debts, papa," said Annie, "so

there is nothing to be paid for me, and I will ask no more of Miss Balcombe"—she laid some stress on the words—"than to tell Miss Cottle what has become of me."

Her tone was noted by Jessie, who changed colour, but offered her hand. "Won't you send any message to any of your friends, Annie?" she whispered, caressingly. "I will deliver it faithfully."

"I have no friends," answered Annie.

"Then you don't count me as one?"

"Have you acted like one? I shall be glad, indeed, if you will say you had no part in this transaction."

"You seem to have a great deal to say to each other, young ladies," interposed Mr. Blandford. "Are you not ready yet, Annie?"

Annie stepped into the carriage, and Mr. Blandford followed, waving his hand to Jessie, who remained on the spot, till the carriage passed out of sight.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blandford endeavoured to propitiate Annie, and reconcile her to his proceedings, which brought him to exert all

his powers for her amusement, and these powers were irresistible. He talked of everything and nothing in a sparkling way, and lured Annie to listen till she was surprised into responding. He had come upon her at a susceptible moment—a moment when she felt her isolation, and longed to throw herself in the arms of her mother. And he met her with that natural tenderness for which she was pining, showing no trace of the coldness which had marked their previous intercourse, but, on the contrary, the warmest love. Whatever could make the meeting disagreeable was avoided, and he sought reconciliation with a delicacy that smoothed the way. She was, it is true, under some constraint, but the vexation this induced at the moment, subsided, and she thought only of the pleasure of rejoining her mother, or of the affectionate consideration of her father, experienced for the first time. And this she could the better appreciate from having lately been under the yoke of strangers, and tasted the uses of servitude. The magnetism of his affection aroused her

own; and feeling proud of his gifts, she felt the more gratified by his attentions. Thus they sped on their journey till the carriage swept up the drive of a rural residence, when Annie was reclining on her father's arm, and, like a woman, had, on a show of love, forgotten her wrongs.

CHAPTER VI.

MANŒUVRING.

The establishment of Dr. Chowler survived the connubial whirlwind, and next day started on a fresh course, having in harness a couple of new brooms, whom Mrs. Chowler dignified with the names of cook and housemaid. In fact, she was in feather again, crowing about her "position in the place," and having crowned this with Mrs. Mockright's skirt, her satisfaction lacked nothing but reconciliation with Arabella. But Arabella had got on her stilts, and respectfully declined to come down. She was gentle, she was obedient, she was studiously civil, but she enveloped herself in silence, and,

moreover, maintained an air of injured meekness, which exasperated Mrs. Chowler. The taunt about Alfred stuck in her throat, and could be moved by no amount of butter. Vainly did Mrs. Chowler humble herself; vainly did she pay little compliments, and try to draw Arabella out; Arabella remained as inaccessible as a snail in its shell.

In this dilemma Mrs. Chowler derived unexpected help from Mrs. Booles. She had kept up that virtuous matron, partly from terror of her tongue, and partly that she might be informed of the movements of Annie; for she began to fear that Annie, however innocent of designs against herself, might prove a rival to Arabella. Of course, this motive was unsuspected by Mrs. Booles. She remained under the impression that Mrs. Chowler was jealous of the Doctor, though regard for appearances prompted her to deny the feeling—for what other reason could there be for her curiosity about Annie? But Mrs. Booles humoured her on this point, content to establish herself with her as an acquaintance, at the same time that she

enjoyed the triumph of entering the house under the eye of "Jane," who lived in the villa opposite, and who did, indeed, behold her visits to Mrs. Chowler with astonishment. On the other hand, it is due to Mrs. Chowler to state, that she rarely allowed Mrs. B. to depart without a glass of gin, which, being procured for nightcaps for herself, was of superior quality, and highly appreciated by her visitor.

Mrs. Booles arrived with news at a moment when Arabella had nearly exhausted Mrs. Chowler's patience, and brought her to the verge of an explosion.

"Pray sit down, Mrs. Booles," said the much-tried mother. "I hope your husband has been treating you better lately?"

"I'm not going to make complaints of him, ma'am," replied Mrs. Booles, with the air of a martyr, "but he's still after Miss Cottle, that creature—though I gave up all for him, which ought to make him worship the ground I tread upon, as he was told by that dear girl, Lady Angelina de Vere, who is confidential lady's maid to the Queen.

But I don't blame *him* so much; it's her. Booles has his faults, but he knows the sacrifice I made for him, and he'd never go after her, if she didn't draw him on."

"She must be a perfect wretch," observed Mrs. Chowler.

"She's every bit that, ma'am; for though the men are bad, the women are badder," said Mrs. Booles, carried by her fervour out of her grammar. "A good woman," she added, personating this rarity for the moment, "is an angel, but a bad one is a devil, ma'am—begging your pardon for using a wicked word: only I get so provoked!"

"I am sure you have a great deal to bear."

"If you believe me, ma'am, when I see Booles looking up at the window every morning, and smiling, and I know she's watching for him—I could tear her eyes out."

"Pray have nothing to say to her. No, be above that. Indeed, she isn't worth talking about." Mrs. Chowler here delivered her real opinion, and considering that she

had shown sufficient interest in Mrs. Booles's grievances to pave the way, ventured an inquiry about Annie.

"I suppose my daughter's French teacher is still at this person's?" she said.

"Oh, yes, ma'am, and the other young woman, too—ladies, I suppose, they call themselves. They are all of a feather in that house, ma'am, even to the girl they've got, and who was with me as a substitute, so that I know her well—as precious a young hussey as there is in Surbiton."

"The Surbiton girls are all bad, but I don't know where the girls are good," observed Mrs. Chowler, unable to refrain from a fling at servants.

"I could tell you things of them that would make your hair stand on end, ma'am."

Mrs. Chowler hastened to avoid this revelation. "You see a good deal of these neighbours of yours?"

"A good deal, ma'am, but not half what's going on. As for Miss, she's been meeting the young gentleman again."

"Young Mr. Mockright."

"Yes, ma'am. He's been to the house; he was there a whole hour the other night; and this afternoon the other young woman met him at the train, and he followed her to Oakhill Path—you know what a place that is, ma'am: then he went off and met Miss herself."

"Where did he meet her?"

"In Langley Lane, of all places in the world, ma'am. I don't know what his intentions are, of course; but I leave you to guess whether they can be *honourable*." Mrs. Booles emphasised the last word, and her face assumed a peculiar look.

Mrs. Chowler also looked unutterables; but, though she wished to hear more about Annie, she did not speak, fearing to commit herself.

"Not but what she's playing her cards well," resumed Mrs. Booles, after this pause.

"You think she is?"

"She's got something up, I'm sure, ma'am—and the other girl is playing into her hands. After she parted with him in Lang-

ley Lane, the other meets him again, and they had a few words, when she went off, too, and I came upon him face to face ; and if ever I saw a ghost, I saw one then."

"Dear me ! what was the matter ?"

"I think there'd been a tiff, ma'am. I remember Booles looking just the same once, I was a little put out, before we were married. But he has forgot all that now"—Mrs. Booles heaved a heartrending sigh—"and thinks of nothing but that creature." Here she made a thrust at the air, as if to plunge a dagger in an imaginary Miss Cottle.

But Mrs. Chowler was absorbed by her news, which, after allowance for exaggeration, seemed to intimate that Alfred had at least got as far as a flirtation with Annie, and that Arabella must strike in at once, or forego her chance : so the thoughtful mother hastened to get rid of Mrs. Booles.

"I am sorry I must go now," she said, looking at her watch, "but come again in a day or two : will you ? I want to have a good talk with you—and to hear about your own troubles, poor thing ! But"—here Mrs.

Chowler quickened her speech, for Mrs. Booles almost broke in at this allusion—"I am in such a hurry now. Stay, take this—for I am sure you need something to keep you up."

And she opened the well-known chiffonier, and drew forth the bottle, presenting Mrs. Booles with a glass of the contents. This was drained at a gulp.

"That's good, ma'am," gasped Mrs. Booles, black in the face. "It took away my breath."

And she went off, wiping her mouth with the end of her shawl.

Mrs. Chowler remained a moment in cogitation. She could not reconcile herself to the possibility of Alfred falling a prey to Annie, after she had laid such toils to secure him for her Arabella; and the imminence of the danger acted on her like inspiration. She conceived a design as ingenious as bold. It required her, indeed, in the first place, to make up her quarrel with Arabella; for to Arabella must be committed the working out of the scheme. But there could now be

no more beating about the bush for reconciliation: she must make up her mind to eat humble pie, and speak to Arabella plainly, and she sought her without a moment's delay.

Arabella was not so ignorant of the situation as her mother supposed. She had observed that Alfred admired Annie, and took opportunities of paying her attention, but he had lately been more polite to herself, and this change, though only marking improvement in his manners, she considered an encouraging sign. Nevertheless, she felt the necessity of being alert; she had nearly worn out her sulk; and, lastly, she wished to be friends with her mother: so Mrs. Chowler found her in no unpropitious mood.

"Has Annie Staunton been here, to-day, Arabella?" she asked, blandly.

"No, mamair," replied Arabella, in a tone approaching to responsive; "it isn't her day, you know. She comes to-morrow."

"Ah, I forgot! Then, I suppose she is lurking about the railway station, as

usual, hoping to fall in with Alfred Mockright."

Arabella's ears reddened at this conjecture, but she said nothing.

"I shouldn't be surprised to hear that she hooks that young man," resumed Mrs. Chowler.

"She, indeed!" and Arabella looked majestic; but presently the idea appeared so ridiculous, that she burst into a laugh, which, however, sounded very much as if it were on the wrong side of the mouth. But Mrs. Chowler got up a smile, as if it tickled her too.

"I know who *might* have him, if she liked," she observed.

"Annie Staunton sha'n't, I'll take care!" exclaimed Arabella, excitedly.

"She would stand no chance against you, if you responded to the young man—for I am sure he loves you. I have watched him,"—this was literal fact,—"and any one could see that he admired you." Mrs. Chowler had been unable to see it with her eyes at full strain. "But, of course, a

young man like him—of his character, I mean—wants encouraging; it is natural he should, and a girl mustn't be mincing in such a case, but throw herself into it, and do what is right by herself. That is my opinion of the matter."

"Poor girls have a hard time of it," murmured Arabella, showing she had not quite forgotten her mother's taunt. "If they don't look out for themselves they are neglected; and if they do, it is thrown up to them."

"Stuff! who takes notice of what people say in a temper?" replied Mrs. Chowler, apologetically. "I like myself to see a girl clever—able to play her cards, and know what she is about; that is the girl for me! And the men like them, too. And, I say, if you gave yourself the trouble, you might be Mrs. Alfred Mockright in a couple of months."

"Perhaps I might," faltered Arabella, her mouth watering at the prospect.

"Well, you do your part, and I will do mine. I am going to the Mockrights, now,

to bid them good-bye, and I'll contrive a way of putting it in train for you. Then all must depend on yourself."

And, with this intimation, Mrs. Chowler left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. MOCKRIGHT'S VISITOR.

Mrs. Chowler was a living verification of the proverb that a good contriver is better than an early riser; for early riser she had never been, but at contriving she could hardly be matched. In a few weeks she had contrived to grasp the skirt of Mrs. Mockright, to fasten Arabella's clutch on the same garment, and finally to work her way round to Mrs. Mockright's blind side, thus securing a fulcrum for moving the Mockright world.

Mrs. Mockright's blind side was her daughter Jane. It was a sure way to her favour to believe in Jane, to hold that young lady to be a paragon, and do her perpetual homage. And this course entailed another

advantage; it took the sting out of Jane herself, who had adder's poison under her lips.

"Here's that odious Mrs. Chowler, again," she cried, to her mother, espying the visitor from the drawing-room window.

"Don't call her such names, Jane," replied Mrs. Mockright. "I thought you liked her. I am sure she always speaks kindly of you."

"Oh, she is civil enough, but one doesn't want her coming here at all hours."

"Well, she's a friendly creature, and she asked my leave to come and see me, without ceremony, and you know you didn't object."

"But we don't want it as a regular thing."

"No, no; certainly not."

Here Mrs. Chowler was ushered in.

"Miss Mockright, I am so glad—so very glad to find you at home," she cried to Jane, taking the young lady by both hands. "Let me look at you. It does me good to see your face. And so kind of you to see me at this extraordinary hour—after dinner! And dear mamma, too. But you know I am

privileged, my dear Mrs. Mockright. You remember, don't you? And I couldn't let you go away for three weeks, you know, without running round to say good-bye."

This salutation was uttered with such velocity as to preclude interruption, and, at the same time, exhaust Mrs. Chowler's breath, so that she could give but a nod and a smile to Ada Mockright, who now entered the room from the conservatory. Ada responded, but Mrs. Mockright and Jane were both stately, thus reminding Mrs. Chowler, that, though privileged, she must be on her best behaviour, and not too much at home.

"How is Arabella?" asked Ada, breaking a momentary silence.

"How kind of you to think of her, dear," answered Mrs. Chowler. But she instantly turned to Jane, recollecting that potentate resented any deference to her sister. "I am a little uneasy about her, Miss Mockright. She has been delicate, lately, and to-day, she has been so out of spirits, and would talk of nothing but your going away. She is so attached to you, you know. Indeed, Mrs.

Mockright, I am half inclined to be jealous of your good daughter—only she *is* good, and that takes away all bitterness, you know. But to hear how Arabella quotes her would surprise you. Now it's—*she won't have this*, because Miss Mockright said it wasn't the thing; and now *she will have that*, because she heard it praised by Miss Mockright. And then she tells us some witty thing, which she calls *Miss Mockright's last.* All in this strain to the end of the chapter. In fact—" Mrs. Chowler again turned to Jane, "you are quite her oracle, dear."

"I believe she does like me," observed Jane.

"Like you!" cried Mrs. Chowler, at the same time stealing a sweet smile at Ada, who smiled back; "she adores you, dear Miss Mockright."

"Arabella is a very sensible girl, and we have all taken to her," remarked Mrs. Mockright, graciously.

"Yes, she has none of those put-on airs of our music-teacher, whom papa makes so much of," said Jane.

"We couldn't suppose she would be like a person of that sort, my dear," rejoined Mrs. Mockright, uplifting her chin.

"Thanks, Mrs. Mockright," said Mrs. Chowler. "Thanks!" She liked the sound of this supposed tip-top phrase. "One thing I must say of Arabella—she is unaffected, and she is so improved in her manner since she met your dear girls, making Miss Mockright her model, as she does."

"But don't you think Miss Staunton is very nice?" interposed Ada, as a protest against the depreciation of Annie.

"Well, my dear, she is very nice for a music-teacher, only she does give herself airs, as your sister says," answered Mrs. Chowler, diplomatically; "and Arabella has often made the same remark."

"I am of a different opinion," returned Ada.

"*You* of an opinion!—ha! ha! ha!" laughed Jane.

Mrs. Mockright laughed, too—in her way. "Ada is so old-fashioned," she remarked, half apologetically.

Mrs. Chowler smiled, and playfully shook her head at Ada—though whether in depreciation or encouragement no one could say. At the same time, she adroitly changed the subject, leading the conversation back to Arabella.

"Have you noticed a languor about Arabella, lately, dear?" she said to Jane. "I ask you because you are so observant, and I may be misled by a mother's anxiety."

"I have thought she wasn't looking so well."

"There it is, dear—she has been very far from well. Such debility, so feverish—and such a loss of appetite, my dear Mrs. Mockright!" And there were tears in Mrs. Chowler's eyes, tears large enough for a crocodile.

"I wonder you don't have advice about her," replied Mrs. Mockright. "Who is your doctor?"

"Well, we have the same doctor as you, Mr. Coldman. But I hav'n't consulted him about Arabella, because I know what he

would say—change of air. Doctors are so unreasonable. How am I to get her change of air at this time of year? She can't go by herself, and I can't go with her, when Dr. Chowler is so tied to his office. Ah! what a thing it is to be in your splendid position, Mrs. Mockright. You can go away with your dear girls when you please."

"Yes, my girls have every advantage money can give them," said Mrs. Mockright, proudly.

"And Miss Mockright deserves it all," said Mrs. Chowler, with a tender look at Jane.

"Couldn't Arabella go with us, as she so wants a change, mamma?" asked Jane.

The proposal seemed to astound Mrs. Mockright, and Mrs. Chowler gave a sort of ecstatic start.

"She would be a companion for me," pursued Jane.

"And for me, too," cried Ada, eagerly.

"Do hold your tongue, Ada—always interfering."

Ada was silenced by this rebuke from her

sister, while Mrs. Mockright found voice to yield a halting assent to the proposal.

"You are so good," exclaimed Mrs. Chowler—"and so thoughtful of you, my dear Miss Mockright! What *could* have put it into your head! If I had been asked to wish for what I most desired, this is what I should have wished for. Arabella will be in ecstacies. But I must hurry off to get her ready. Shall she meet you at the station, Mrs. Mockright?"

"No; we will call for her on our way there," said Mrs. Mockright, more graciously now, seeing the thing was to be done, and having got over the shock.

Mrs. Chowler was profuse in acknowledgments, and declared she must kiss dear Miss Mockright, who had originated the project, and whom she thereupon saluted. Jane accepted the smack stoically, wiping it off with her fingers, while bedewing her cheek. So Mrs. Chowler departed, all smiles without, and laughing in her sleeve within; and reached home in an elated state.

Success had been easier than she expected,

and things augured well for Arabella, though Mrs. Chowler could not repress uneasiness about Alfred's meeting with Annie. While still believing that Mrs. Booles had magnified, and that this mountain might be only a mole-hill, she reflected that even molehills could trip people up. Hence it behoved Arabella to mind her ps and qs—especially her cues, of which the prudent mother determined to give her a good supply. Arabella, moreover, would have the field to herself for three weeks, and might win the game in that time if she made good use of her trumps.

It may seem strange that Mrs. Chowler bore no ill-will to Annie, but her nature was not spiteful—except to those enemies of the human race, servant girls; and Annie always declined wine, and gave gratuitous lessons to Arabella—great merits in the eyes of a domestic economist. Mrs. Chowler did, indeed, feel annoyed at her coming between Arabella and Alfred; but she was not devoid of woman's kindness, and on other points, would rather have done Annie a good turn than not. But, of course, she could not allow her to thwart her "object."

Mother and daughter laughed heartily at the Mockrights when Mrs. Chowler reached home, and told Arabella of her achievement. They instantly set-to packing, and were so engrossed by the occupation, that they did not pause till it was completed. Then Mrs. Chowler sat down on Arabella's bed for a few last words of admonition.

"There's one thing I needn't caution you about, Arry," she said, knowing it was, in fact, Arabella's weak point. "It doesn't answer to be forward."

"Forward!" echoed Arabella, recalling the taunt about the boating excursion: "how, mamair?"

"Now don't get your back up, Arry: I said, it isn't a fault you are likely to fall into, though it is the besetting sin of most girls. But you mustn't be too stánd off, neither. There's a happy mean—now a sort of shrinking, and now a little warmth, as if you had a preference, but seemed afraid to show it. That is what piques men."

"How you talk, mamair—as if I was a little goose!"

"Oh! I like to teach my grandmother," rejoined Mrs. Chowler, determined to keep in good humour. "My girl has got sense, and I want her to use it, as I have no doubt she will. But there is no harm in giving her a few hints."

"Only they are such strange ones," said Arabella, whom the worry of packing had indisposed for a lecture.

"Well, I shall say no more on that subject; but, whatever you do, keep in with Jane."

"I hate that Jane. She is such a bully, and domineers over everybody."

"She's a cat," concurred Mrs. Chowler, with a remembrance of old affronts: "but cats can scratch, and so we mustn't provoke them. We have an object, and people who have objects must put up with cats, and then you may use their paws, instead of dreading them. Perhaps, the day will come when you may bully her. Not that I should like you to do such an un-Christian thing, but you might then set before her how she had plagued everyone, and give her conscience

no peace, as a way of bringing her to repentance."

"If I can ever tell her what I think of her, I should consider it a duty," responded Arabella, catching the religious spirit of her mother. "But don't let us *talc* any more to-night, mamair. I am quite tired out."

"So you are, my pet. There, good night!"

Here came a maternal kiss, and Mrs. Chowler left Arabella to repose.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEETING OF MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

Mrs. Blandford was not unprepared for the arrival of Annie. She had, indeed, been promised this meeting from the moment of her instalment at Walton, and the prospect had reconciled her to her captivity. For such her condition was, in fact. There was no appearance of restraint, but she felt that restraint did exist, though her movements were apparently free. In truth, Mr. Blandford possessed a more effectual check upon her than bolts and bars; for he made her understand that on her submission to him depended her future relations with Annie. So she resigned herself to necessity, and was as calm as the sorrow of her life would permit.

At length, the day had come for her reunion with Annie—the day and the hour; for Mr. Blandford, feeling sure of the cooperation of Jessie, mentioned that they would arrive about four o'clock. The excited mother kept looking at her watch, and counted the moments, till her ear caught the sound of carriage-wheels. Then she would have sprung from her chair and rushed out, but her limbs refused to move. Not that she had long to wait. A hurried step came along the passage; the door flew open; and Annie was in her arms.

They were both full of inquiries, only interrupted by caresses and new embraces, and it was some moments before Annie calmed down.

"Now let me look at you, dear mamma," she said, at length. "Ah! your face is brighter now, because I have come. And we are not to be parted again! Papa has told me so."

"Then I shall be as happy as I can be, Annie."

Annie replied with a kiss, which said more than words.

"And now I must look at *you*, my child," resumed her mother, gazing in her face. "Yes, you are the same as ever, and all I could wish. And how did you leave Miss Cottle?"

"She is the same as ever, too, mamma," smiled Annie.

"I am sure of that. I should have been uneasy about you, but that I knew you were in safe hands."

"It was a satisfaction to me to feel you would think so; but I had, in fact, another guardian, besides Miss Cottle. Whom do you think, mamma?"

"Well, whom?"

"Ah, you will never guess, so I may as well say. What do you think of Miss Balcombe?"

"You surprise me."

"Papa sent her the day after he took you away. But we mustn't bring up bygones now. She was very agreeable, and we never quarrelled more than twice a-day."

"Quite enough, I think. But where is she? She came with you, of course!"

"No, but she is to be here in a few days."

"I am glad of that"—and Mrs. Blandford spoke with a little excitement—"for I have quite a desire to see her, and she has always seemed to avoid me."

They were silent a moment, and Annie felt vexed that she had mentioned Jessie.

"You have never told me what she is like, Annie," resumed her mother, with a sigh.

"She is peculiar-looking," replied Annie. And she described Jessie with artistic minuteness, though the conception thus raised in Mrs. Blandford's mind was as unlike Jessie as could be.

"And you have been here all alone, mamma!" Annie continued, by way of changing the subject.

"A great deal alone, but I have had a visitor," answered Mrs. Blandford, emerging from a momentary abstraction. "Nor have I been here the whole time. About three weeks ago your papa suddenly took me away, and we went about the country for ten days, when we met Lady Clara Mullet,

whom I knew as a child. She said she was staying in this neighbourhood, and your papa invited her to call, and she has been twice."

"I am glad you have had somebody. Now tell me what sort of person Lady Clara is, mamma."

"Well, you ought to know; for I believe it was on your account I was permitted to receive her, as your papa thought she would be useful in introducing you in the world. But this is only my own impression, as you know how close he is. Lady Clara herself you will like, but I hope you won't be too much influenced by her."

"Why, mamma?"

"Because she devotes herself wholly to pleasure, and if she had not such a good heart, it would spoil her."

"Is she so giddy?"

"So giddy, I am almost afraid you will forget me, Annie, when she drags you into the same whirl."

"Do you think I can ever forget my dear mamma!"

And Annie put her arm round Mrs. Blandford's neck, and kissed back her tears.

"Now, come and show me the grounds, mamma," she continued, to divert her thoughts. "Papa has gone to town, so we have the place to ourselves to-day, and you must take me into every corner of it."

Mrs. Blandford agreed, but first led her to her own room—a cheerful, pretty apartment, looking on the lawn, and where Annie found Burton, the girl who had attended her at her father's house in Great Stanhope Street, and who was again to be her maid. Annie was in better heart than at their former meeting, and greeted her with more friendliness, of which the girl showed a due appreciation.

Mrs. Blandford left them together while she put on her bonnet.

"You have been with my mamma, I hear," Annie said. "I don't know that I ought to take you from her."

"Your mamma had nothing for me to do, miss," replied Burton.

"And you think I shall prove more troublesome?"

"The trouble will be a pleasure, miss; and I like to be busy."

"I daresay I shall keep you employed."

"You can't help it, miss—what with your dresses, and your toilet, and your beautiful hair. And I hope you will find me useful in other ways, too."

The last words were uttered in what seemed a significant tone; at least, they caused Annie to look up, and her eyes met Burton's.

"You will always find me most devoted to you, miss," said the maid, quietly, but with a steady look.

This profession of devotedness seemed a little dragged in, and took Annie by surprise, but she set it down as a flourish, to be acknowledged by a smile. Her nature was trustful, and it never entered her head that Burton might be a spy in ladymaid's clothing—perhaps her keeper—and now angling for her confidence. Confidence Annie had none to give. For the moment,

she believed in her father, and her faith made no reserve, while it remained unshaken.

Soon her mother returned, and they walked through the house, an old fashioned dwelling, but prettily furnished, and having an air of comfort. The tour of the rooms brought them back to their starting point, whence a French window allowed them to saunter out. The grounds were of small extent, but were laid out in a way to conceal their bounds, and Annie was delighted with their seclusion. This was not even broken by the river, which flowed in front of the lawn, for rarely did a boat pass, and the stillness was heightened to the eye by the ruins of Walton bridge. In the mid-stream rose a stake, which marked the spot where on a bridge of more primitive form, Cæsar and his legions crossed. A nook of the lawn was furnished with a rustic bench, inviting mother and daughter to sit, and here they let their glance scan the scene. But their hearts were full of another subject, one of moment to both, and which each desired, yet almost feared, to broach. At last the words

came from the anxious mother. She told Annie that her future position had been mentioned but lightly by Mr. Blandford, leaving it in uncertainty, but that she understood no step had been taken about the divorce, and that she and her husband would live apart, without their marriage being impugned. At the same time, this might be a false impression, since it rested on no promise, and rose in her mind simply from conjecture. Annie tried to allay her misgivings on the point and inspire her with confidence. But Mrs. Blandford now broke down. She felt the presence of one on whom she could lean, who gave her sympathy, and in a manner shared her peril, and she thought of nothing but weeping out her grief by Annie's side. How this might distress Annie she entirely overlooked, not because she was indifferent, but because her sorrow was so absorbing. In Annie's absence, she had been more or less under the eye of Mr. Blandford, while her thoughts were diverted from herself by the separation, but no v she felt unshackled, and her character asserted its weakness, by

falling prostrate. She poured repinings into Annie's ear in the most dismal form, till at last, Annie thought it well to let her grief expend itself, and responded only by a pressure of the hand or an endearing word. Long was it before Mrs. Blandford calmed, but Annie's tenderness prevailed in the end, and she returned to the house comforted.

Annie strolled in the grounds alone in the evening. She felt the unhappiness of her mother's position, even in its best aspect; but her nature grew reconciled to events when they could not be combatted. Trial drew out her qualities, as fire those of metal, and she refined under the discipline, which, indeed, made her a different being from what she would otherwise have been. A germ of goodness she would always have shown, but it might have been weighed down by her lightheartedness, if this had not been restrained by sorrow. Her character would then have become encrusted by qualities which it now wore but as a veil—a veil so transparent as to enhance the beauties beneath. Not until it came to the proof

did she herself know on some points whereof she was made. Thus a time had been when she dreamt of acquiring a position by marriage, and showing her father that she could take a place in the world without his help, and in spite of his renouncement. The opportunity came and she forgot her aspirations, and thought only of examining her heart, and sparing the feelings of her suitor. And now she clung to the father she had intended to defy, and was content that he should control both herself and her mother.

Yet this feeling did not divert her from an object with which it conflicted—an object continually in her mind, and to which the recent conversation with her mother gave fresh attraction. Unfortunately all her thinking failed to place it in a clearer light, and it still involved her in the same maze as at first. She had gathered up a few incidents, and put them together, but they might have no connexion in reality, and the impression she had formed was not one to be hastily divulged. Indeed, it sometimes appeared

fanciful to herself, and only by going constantly over the details could she sustain her belief in its probability.

Her mind was dwelling on the subject when she heard a rustling in the adjacent shrubbery, and turning, started to perceive Touton, Dr. Chowler's jackal.

"I didn't expect to find you here, miss," he observed naïvely.

"Nor I to see you, Touton," smiled Annie. "You came in search of my mamma, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss: this is the house I told you of. I thought she might have been brought back by this time: so I was having a look round."

"And did you ask for her at the gate?"

"That isn't my way of working, miss. I picked up the name of the housekeeper, and it was for her I asked, and then I slipped into the shrubbery, and was having a spy round, when I caught sight of you."

"Well, my mamma *is* here, and you can tell Dr. Chowler I am with her, and that we have nothing to say at present."

"Hadn't you better write a bit of a note to him, miss?—because I ain't going back to him straight. I've got a job to do first down in Devonshire."

"Devonshire!" And the colour mounted in Annie's cheek.

"Yes, at Torquay, miss."

Annie was silent a moment: then let her eyes rest thoughtfully on Touton.

"Would you undertake a little business there for me?" she said—"a very private business, not to be mentioned to anyone."

"That's the sort I'm used to, miss. You tell me what it is, and I'll set to work for you."

"Well, it is this. I want to know what has become of the daughter of a Mrs. Bailey, who lived at Watcombe, near Torquay, about twenty years ago, at a place called Cherry Farm."

"Is that all you know of her at present?"

"Yes, except that both the parents are dead."

"Werry few particulars!" said Touton, musingly.

"And making inquiries may cost you money," said Annie, producing a five-pound note, which she had lately received as honorarium from Mrs. Mockright. Touton's eye caught the word "five," cabalistically framed in black, and assumed a benevolent glitter.

"Money's useful, miss, no doubt," he said. "I'll do my best with it for you."

They consulted a little, when Touton went off, and Annie made her way to the house, reflecting that she had taken a step which, if it had any result, might affect the whole future of her life. Her interview with Touton had not been without an observer, who now stepped from behind a tree, where, though too distant to hear what was said, she had kept them both in view, while unseen herself. It was Annie's maid—Burton.

CHAPTER IX.

JESSIE IN GREAT STANHOPE STREET.

Miss Cottle heard with dismay from Jessie of Annie's encounter with her father, and departure in his company, and she put a flood of questions to Jessie, which she frankly answered. Indeed, Jessie's manner was kinder to her than it had ever been before. The excitement of the morning had yielded to a revulsion of feeling, which disarmed and softened, though it disquieted her. Not only did she feel remorse for her betrayal of Annie, but she knew that Annie suspected her treachery, and she thought bitterly of her last words. . In this estrangement of her friend she seemed to stand in the world isolated, and the sense of loneliness drew her to Miss Cottle. She took comfort in

consoling the poor spinster, assuring her that she would often see Annie, that they would exchange visits, and that both Annie and her mother would keep up the acquaintance through life. Such a prospect cheered Miss Cottle, although, being used to regard disappointment as the natural issue of things, she looked at it doubtingly, as if it were a sort of mental mirage. But she did not the less appreciate the kindness of Jessie, and reproached herself for having ever thought of her unlovingly. Jessie, on her part, felt the influence of such a tender heart, and a day of this communion made them excellent friends.

How long Jessie's attachment would have endured, it is impossible to say, for the next morning brought her a letter from Mr. Blandford, summoning her to town, and she was obliged to take her departure. Mr. Blandford's carriage awaited her at Waterloo, and threading its way through the gayest part of the town, set her down at his mansion in Great Stanhope-street. She scanned the exterior with

some curiosity, and her mouth slightly quivered as she reflected that hereafter it might rest with herself to say whether this house should call her mistress. The thought evidently gave her no pleasure, but the cloud it threw on her face disappeared, and, passing in, she glanced approvingly at the costly appointments of the mansion, the rich carpets, and the choice furniture, not concealing her appreciation when she encountered Mr. Blandford in the drawing-room.

"I have been admiring at every step," she said, "such a beautiful house, and everything in character with it."

"I am glad you like it," replied Mr. Blandford, in his blandest style. "You have only Annie to share it with you, and she won't be here for ever, you know."

Jessie looked down at this allusion to the future.

"Annie is here now, or you would not have sent for me?" she said.

"Yes. I want you to go with her to Folkestone. Lady Clara Mullet is there,

and will chaperon you both; for you will accompany Annie wherever she goes."

"You are very kind to me. I hope I may receive the same welcome from Annie."

"Why do you doubt it? You have had no quarrel."

"No. But I saw when we parted that she suspected me of—of—"

"Come, out with it—a little deception, you mean." And Mr. Blandford smiled his gayest to cover the sarcasm.

Nevertheless, Jessie knew that he referred, not to her dealings with Annie, but to her relations with himself, in connexion with the secrets she derived from her mother. She seemed stupefied for an instant: then she buried her face in her hands, overpowered by her emotion.

"What is this?" cried Mr. Blandford, stepping over to her, and laying his hand on her arm. "You can't think I accused you of deception—I, who prompted what you did, and recognise it as a service to both myself and Annie."

Jessie raised her face at these words, not

without remembering that emotion was rather becoming to it, and certainly the tears on her cheek were like dew on bloom.

"I am ashamed of this outbreak," she said. "I thought of something that distressed me, and was borne away by it. I shall go to Annie, now, if you have nothing more to say."

Annie was in her boudoir, and expected the visit, her father having told her that he had written for Jessie. Matters had turned out so different from what she apprehended, that she was not indisposed for reconciliation, and hence met Jessie with the usual embrace.

"Why did you part with me so coldly?" said Jessie. "But I need not ask. You suspected me of acting in conjunction with Mr. Blandford."

"I bring no charge," replied Annie.

"But you did then hint one, and I confess there were some grounds for it. I am under great obligations to your papa, greater than he will permit me to tell; and he put a pressure upon me; and—forgive me,

Annie !—I thought it would be for you good, and yielded." And she dropped her head on Annie's neck.

"I don't doubt your motives," replied Annie, "and we will hope that it may turn out for the best, as it now promises. As for the past, let us say no more about it."

Jessie responded with a caress. "I am happy now, and ready for any enterprise," she said, with that bound from sadness to gaiety which she so often made, and to which she had accustomed Annie. So they chatted away, and the time passed unnoted, till Burton announced the carriage to convey them to the train.

CHAPTER X.

LADY CLARA MULLET.

Folkestone was full, from the topmost storey of the Pavilion to the humblest lodging-house, and every train brought fresh visitors. They were met in the narrow High Street, and the streets that climbed higher, on the beach, and on the "leads," and in all steep places. One could hardly imagine that the world contained so many young ladies—at least with such good looks; and as for old ladies, they were there of both sexes, and in numbers innumerable. The townspeople were in the best humour, as they always are; for—blotting out the cabmen—pleasanter folk than the Folkestoners do not exist, and

English kindness here seems to acquire polish from the sight of France.

Lady Clara Mullet occupied a house on the Parade, which she had taken for a month. She was the only child of the Earl of Bramblecourt, whose three centuries of ancestors had so deteriorated the family inheritance, that by his help it had been brought down to a mere shadow. His death would divert this relic to a distant branch of the family, represented by Charles Harrifield, also heir-presumptive to the title, though the Earl, now over three score, and an obdurate widower, sometimes threatened to baulk the arrangement by marrying again. But this was only said during violent attacks of gout or ill-humour, and the Earl generally spoke affectionately of his kinsman, showing none of the jealousy usual in such cases. Indeed, it was believed that Harrifield might have been knit to him by a nearer tie, only that he encountered a wealthy rival, whereupon the Lord of Bramblecourt had felt the attraction of gold, and given his daughter to Mr. Mullet.

Charles Harrifield promised well up to this date. He took honours at Oxford, and began to prepare for political life, for which he had graduated in the university debating-club, and shown aptitude. But now his whole character changed. He seemed to forswear ambition, and plunged into the pleasures of the gay world, as if determined to consume his moderate patrimony in riotous living. Not that he had been violently attached to Lady Clara, his love for her never rose above a sentiment—a sentiment inspired by their companionship, and fostered by her beauty. But he was wounded in his pride; he saw himself deprived of what seemed within his grasp; and in a fit of spleen, he threw up the game. Indolence is a habit easily acquired, and it is hard to escape from the toils of dissipation; so Charles Harrifield passed further from his former self, and finally sank into the man about town. Some whispered, indeed, that the transformation was not wholly due to Lady Clara, but might be charged equally, if not entirely, against a mistress of hum-

bler mark, though, as none could give the name of this enchantress, she was generally considered fabulous.

Lady Clara remained what she had always been—giddy, thoughtless, and vain, fond of pleasure, and seeing the greatest of pleasures in the world's admiration. Perhaps, she had never thought of Harrifield as a husband; at any rate, she resigned him without a sigh, and accepted Mr. Mullet. Her marriage brought horses and carriages, and jewels, a good establishment, and troops of friends, and what could she look for more?

Lady Clara was now twenty-eight. She had been twice a mother, and not only provided her children with the best nurses, but made it a point to spend an hour every day in the nursery. Other household cares she had none, so she lived in the whirl she loved, and hardly knew a quiet moment.

Such a career was not preservative of beauty, and Lady Clara's suffered, but youth afforded facilities for art, and thus amended defects. Apparently she retained her attrac-

tions of early days. Wondering blue eyes gave a childlike impress to her face, which was fair as a lily, and harmonised with her flaxen hair, falling in a circling curl on her shoulder. The luxuriant tresses behind were not her own, but no one could detect the annex, and it looked—and really was—as natural as the bloom on her cheek. Maternity had spared her figure, leaving her bust faultless, and she moved with the grace of a queen.

She was now awaiting the arrival of Annie and Jessie, and reclined in a luxurious chair, designing to skim the last novel. But the volume had fallen from her hand, and reposed on a cushion below, while Lady Clara wove a maze of her own, lulled into a doze by the prosy pages. A stir in the house broke the spell, and her eyes opened on her maid, who announced her expected guests.

"They've just drove up, in a cab, my lady," she added, breathless.

"In a cab!" rejoined Lady Clara. "Then they have missed your master. How extra-

ordinary! he must have made some mistake, Garner."

This did not seem extraordinary to Garner, but she thought it inexpedient to say so, and, in fact, Lady Clara neither looked for, nor waited a reply. She heard approaching steps, and hastened to the stairs, where she met her guests ascending, both in travelling costume, and followed by Burton, carrying wraps.

"My dear Annie!" And she gave the kiss of welcome, at the same time bending to Jessie with a friendly smile, and then offering her hand.

"How provoking for you to have missed Mr. Mullet," she said. "He has gone with the carriage, to the station, to fetch you, and will be as annoyed as I am, at the inconvenience you have been put to."

"We have done very well, I assure you," answered Annie; "so pray don't think of that. I am only concerned that Mr. Mullet should take so much trouble for nothing."

"I can't think how he missed you."

"Well, the fault must be mine—for he

has never seen us, you know, and I ought to have remembered your thoughtfulness, and asked if there was any carriage waiting."

"I told him to look out for Burton. Ah! there she is." Burton curtsied low. "You know Mr. Mullet, Burton?"

"Yes, indeed, my lady."

"And didn't you see our carriage?"

"I didn't notice, my lady; I was so afraid of things being left in the train."

"I saw a carriage as we drove away," struck in Jessie, as Lady Clara led her and Annie into the room; "it was the only private one there, but it seemed to have come for two other young ladies, who were seated in it. The servants were in a light green livery.

"That is ours," said Lady Clara. "Isn't it a mystification? But we shall have it cleared up now; for I hear the carriage at the door. How funny if Mr. Mullet has brought us the two young ladies." And she burst into a laugh, in which Annie and Jessie joined.

But Mr. Mullet presented himself alone —a man of forty-five, good-looking and well-

bred, and perfectly composed. He paid his respects to Annie and Jessie, and asked a thousand pardons.

"Not that I can blame myself," he added. "I picked up the only two young ladies I found unattended, and put them into the carriage, and—"

"Now do say they are here," cried Lady Clara, with another merry peal.

"Laugh away! I should have brought them, I can tell you, only they just asked me in time if I was Mr. Somebody-else."

"You silly man! why didn't you look for Miss Blandford's maid. I told you to look for Burton."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Mullet, with a smile of wonder. "Why you must forget what you said. Your last words were—don't be looking about for Burton, because she isn't coming."

"Well, I declare!"

"Yes, you declare, of course. Ah! Clara, Clara! what I always tell you, you have a good deal of cleverness, but it isn't the sort for practical life. You ladies"—Mr. Mullet

turned smilingly to Annie and Jessie, "are all distracting to us, but—ha! ha!—we have our revenge: you get distracted yourselves when you come to the practical."

And with this shot Mr. Mullet retreated, leaving his wife to see the two guests to their rooms.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNIVERSAL WANT.

Charles Harrifield made his book to win at Newmarket, and he lost: whence it became necessary to resort to his old financier Mr. Ravel. The long vacation had sent the solicitor out of town, but Flam the clerk undertook to forward a letter; and to this an early post brought the following reply:—

"Folkestone, Monday.

"My Dear Sir,

"I am down here for a few days, and I can arrange your matter here better than at Lincoln's Inn if you will run down. Indeed, it will rest with yourself to effect a very satisfactory arrangement of the whole business. "Believe me, &c.

"Henry Ravel."

Thus it happened that Charles Harrifield came to Folkestone, and took up his quarters at the Pavilion. Ravel did not expect such a quick appearance, and was surprised to find Harrifield's card on the table, on returning from a jaunt. It is true, circumstances pressed, but it had become difficult to set Harrifield in motion, even under pressure, and he habitually delayed as long as he could. The only corrective of his indecision was his caprice, and this it was that now operated, imparting a momentum that carried him rather to the pleasant watering-place than his lawyer.

But there he came, and so afforded an opportunity to Ravel, who had decided that the time was ripe for bringing forward the scheme of a marriage with Jane Mockright. He did not conceal from himself that there might be difficulties in the way—matrimonial schemes always involved difficulties; but the advantages were too manifest to be overlooked, even by such a trifler as Harrifield. Ravel knew indeed such things might be ignored when, to use his own term,

"fancy" led in another direction. Lately "fancy" had been busy with himself, and often recalled to him the image of Jessie Balcombe, bringing the knowledge that, in affairs of this kind, woman might be a greater influence than he had supposed. But he believed Harrifield to be free from any preference, and he did not apprehend objections from a different feeling, considering that money would stand its ground against everything but woman. Perhaps, his was not too low a view of civilised life! at any rate, on this suggestion, he presented himself next morning at the Pavilion, when Harrifield was at breakfast.

A friendly reception, an easy chair, a well-spread table, and one of the best apartments in the hotel, with the sea in front, and sun and breeze pouring through the open window, might have rendered the lawyer oblivious of the position of his client, if his experience had not taught him that a spendthrift is never so sumptuous as when his purse is at its last ebb.

"What do you take?" cried Harrifield—"tea, coffee, or chocolate. They are all here;

for I hardly knew which to drink till they came up."

"Thank you," answered Ravel, "I breakfasted an hour ago. But I will take a cup of tea to bear you company."

"Ah! you are an early bird—must be wide awake, eh! But you can eat something, and you see what there is. Help yourself."

The lawyer did not need further invitation; for he saw a fascination in the eatables in spite of his previous breakfast, and he set vigorously to work, beginning with omelette, proceeding to devilled kidneys and ham, and finishing with the breast of a partridge. Such voracity disquieted Harrifield, the champing teeth keeping his nerves on the rack, and he felt it a relief when the waiter cleared the table.

"I find a second breakfast isn't a bad thing in this sea air," observed Ravel, "and I think it has put me in a better frame of mind for business, though our business is fortunately not of a character to make mouths at."

"I shall be glad if you continue of this opinion, but, anyhow, we needn't discuss it at present," said Harrifield, deferring the necessity as long as possible. "I must have my smoke." And he produced some havannahs.

"That won't interfere with our gossip, Mr. Harrifield," rejoined Ravel, accepting and lighting a cigar, at the same time bending in acknowledgment—for he remembered the possible Lord Bramblecourt of the future; "and, in fact, I hope that the subject will make the smoke more enjoyable."

"Oh! very well," said Harrifield, with resignation.

"My letter—"

"Yes, I know about that. Go on with the rest—only don't have a long explanation if you can avoid it."

"Well, some explanation there must be, because the state of your affairs, you know—"

"Of course I know, and it is confoundedly unpleasant to know, and especially when one has it always dinned into one's ears.

The fact is, Ravel, I know too much of my affairs, and I want to say as little about them as possible."

"But you must let me tell you the truth, Mr. Harrifield."

"Is that imperative?"

"Absolutely. When I have procured you the sum you now want, your income will be reduced to two hundred a-year."

Harrifield looked startled, and was silent a moment, but then snapped his fingers, exclaiming, "So be it!"

"I am sorry you are so easily reconciled to such a condition," rejoined Ravel, encouraged by a nervous twitch of his mouth, "because, as I mentioned in my letter, I see a way to something more satisfactory."

Harrifield took two or three puffs at his cigar.

"But the way itself is *not* satisfactory, I suppose," he then said. "However, I see I must make up my mind to disagreeables, so let us hear your project—if telling it won't bore you."

"It can't have that effect either on myself

or you," smiled Ravel, "for we needn't go into a long story. The simple fact is this. Lord Bramblecourt told me the other day it was time you married, and that if you didn't—"

"Of course, he would," broke in Harrifield. "The standing threat, ever since I was at Eton."

"Anyway he wants you to marry. Now the money raised on your property has all been furnished, as you know, by Mr. Mockright, and Mr. Mockright has a daughter, whom I believe he would be glad to see the future Countess of Bramblecourt."

"Ha!"

"With her hand you would receive back your patrimony free, and a handsome sum in money. You have seen the lady, and must allow she has other attractions."

Harrifield contemplated the lawyer under his eyebrows, but made no remark.

"You have, no doubt, heard there is likely to be a vacancy for Swashborough?" Ravel continued. "Old Sleepiman, whom we have been so long expecting to retire, is now

dying; and though the Conservatives have been creeping up lately, Lord Bramblecourt thinks his interest is sure to carry you in. Here is the opening you wished for, five years ago; the marriage will set you straight in money matters; and you will begin your career."

Harrifield yawned. "We have got into a rigmarole about nothing," he said, in a tone that betrayed annoyance. "In the first place, it isn't usual for a gentleman to sell himself to a woman for money. At any rate, I can't do it."

"I thought financial arrangements were common in marriages of the aristocracy," said Ravel, with something of a sneer. "I never was concerned for one that hadn't its settlements — all well looked after, too."

"Perhaps, so," answered Harrifield, his colour rising; "but I say again, I won't sell myself. And as for Swashborough, and what I wished five years ago, you are talking of the world before the flood. What I wish for now is to be let alone. I don't want a

wife; I don't want a seat in Parliament; and least of all, do I want a career."

"But you want money, Mr. Harrifield," smiled Ravel, rising. "So think over our conversation, and give me an answer to-morrow."

And with these words he departed.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. MULLET.

The conversation was not to Harrifield's taste, and, therefore, he felt disinclined to think it over, as the lawyer had suggested. But the thought would obtrude itself—the fact blurted out by Ravel—that he wanted money! In vain he gazed on the sea, and ran his eye from sail to sail on its breast; in vain he took refuge in the *Morning Post;* the financial difficulty could not be eluded, and soon enchained his attention.

He considered that fortune had dealt him hard measure. It had goaded him into a life of ease, and now brought him to the end of his patrimony, when he had given up ambition, and wished for nothing but repose

—of course, taking what enjoyment he could, but interfering with no one. It seemed the climax that he should be reduced to subsisting on two hundred a-year, a sum that would hardly pay for his man, who, it may be remarked, received board wages, and wore gloves. But what could be done? He found no answer to this question, and kept recurring to Ravel's proposal, which he felt to be so humiliating, if not insulting. It touched his sense of honour, and at first he could not think of it with composure. To marry a girl for her money—to allow his hand and name to be bought, and to take the price, and expend it before the world, seemed to him the pitch of degradation. But this storm of sentiment gradually subsided. The proposal looked less repulsive, as it became more familiar, and Ravel had shown how it could be considered in a favourable light. Certainly the thing was done everyday, and money must be regarded in a judicious marriage. When, indeed, cannot sophisms be found to reconcile us to what is convenient, and what is there that

may not be justified by the custom of the world? Harrifield's scruples grew fainter under such persuasion; habit indisposed him for effort, and finally he decided to go with the stream, and let it bear him whereever it would.

Not without regrets came this decision, nor without memories, and these were linked with at least two fair faces, one of which rebuked his heartlessness, and the other his meanness. Jessie he had decoyed, and would have betrayed: Annie he had seen but once, but she continually recurred to his mind. He thought what an influence she might have exercised on his destiny if they had met earlier—what she might make of him even now, if they were thrown together and held the same rank in life. His experience taught him that women are better than men—purer and more constant, and that they may inspire the highest aims without being themselves ambitious. Such inspiration he might have derived from Annie. But it was not to be, and he resigned himself to the event.

In this mood he strolled out, and sauntered along the foot of the cliffs, unconscious of being observed by Lady Clara, who, with Annie and Jessie, occupied a carriage which at this moment dashed past.

"I really think that is a lover of mine—Charles Harrifield!" cried Lady Clara.

"It is Mr. Harrifield," smiled Annie. "Is he one of your legion?"

"He has been in the service from his youth upward. But how came you to know him?"

"Well, he met me during my Surbiton epoch, and supposes me to be a teacher of French and music."

"What fun!" cried Lady Clara, clapping her hands and laughing. "Let us contrive some way of keeping up his delusion. It will be as good as playing a charade, with the addition of reality."

"But I can't pretend to be teaching French and music to *you*," said Annie, her love of mischief kindling, and disposing her to the trick. "What do you say, Jessie? Is there anything to be done?"

"Certainly, if you will carry it out," said Jessie. "Why shouldn't you be Lady Clara's companion?"

"Excellent idea!" cried Lady Clara. "Nothing could be better."

"Do you think I am qualified for such an agreeable post?" smiled Annie.

"You put the question so prettily that it answers itself," rejoined Lady Clara. "But we will stop the carriage and take him up."

"Remember, we are half-an-hour late, Lady Clara," observed Jessie, dropping her veil, and, at the same time, giving a significant pinch to Annie.

Annie understood that she was to oppose the proposition; why, she could not conceive, but no one could fathom Jessie's motives.

"Pray don't stop," she said to Lady Clara; "for I have already damaged my character for punctuality, and it is very unlikely that Mr. Harrifield can come on with us, on such short notice."

"And it is equally short notice for us to play our comedy," suggested Jessie. "We must study our parts, and go through

a rehearsal, before we can present ourselves."

"That is well thought of," cried Lady Clara; "but you are a little oracle, and always say something wise. A rehearsal is indispensable, and we will have one directly we get home."

"I think I had better take up humility at once, by way of becoming used to it," said Annie. "But what part will you play, Jessie?"

"Oh! the fine lady, of course."

The conversation went on, and they had arranged their plot by the time the carriage arrived at Sandgate. Here, they were to meet Mr. Mullet's yacht, together with that gentleman himself and two of his intimates, Colonel Dashwood, of the Guards, and Mr. Ashley de Jonnes, originally Jones, M.P., a sucking legislator. But their dismay was great to find no one in attendance, and see the yacht sailing in the distance.

"Now isn't this provoking!" exclaimed Lady Clara: "Such a beautiful day for a sail, and the water so smooth, we should really have enjoyed it."

"We pay the penalty of being late," remarked Jessie, resignedly, "but without being to blame."

"It is amusing, too, to see them sailing off so coolly," laughed Annie.

Lady Clara, who possessed the mildest of tempers, joined in the laugh, forgetting both her anger and disappointment.

"It is extraordinary," she observed, according to wont, "if Mr. Mullet has made a mistake, but there has been a blunder somewhere. The coachman declares he was ordered to be at the house at twelve o'clock: now we arranged to be here at twelve. At the same time I said positively they were to wait for us, if we were late."

"Then there is no excuse for them, and I shall thoroughly scold Mr. Mullet," said Annie. "This time he can't escape."

Lady Clara looked doubtful, and Jessie smiled, and felt inclined to be sarcastic. A weak character excited her contempt, and she regarded Lady Clara as a doll, without either passion or purpose. But Lady Clara knew Charles Harrifield; he was at hand;

and circumstances might arise in which Jessie could make the doll her puppet: so she decided to curb her wit and be civil.

The rest of the day passed very agreeably, and, at kettledrum, the three ladies laid their heads together as to how they should receive Mr. Mullet and his companions. The defaulters only arrived in time to dress for dinner: therefore, they did not know their position till all met in the drawing-room.

The ladies opened their attack together, and took away the breath of the guardsman and legislator, who had not a word to reply; but they failed to discompose Mr. Mullet. Indeed, he assumed the air of the injured, though without dropping his good-humour, and even Jessie was forced to laugh.

"You really," she said at last, "seem to make everyone an *avvocato diavolo*, Mr. Mullet, in order to bring out your excellences."

"That is precisely the character you impose on *me*," replied Mr. Mullet, "and, to tell the truth, the theme of *your* excellences is one I never tire of. What have I

been saying all day? Dashwood and Jonnes can tell you."

"Dash me, if I can!" cried the guardsman. "You talked to Jonnes, and I didn't attend much."

"What was it, Jonnes?" pursued Mr. Mullet, undaunted.

"Well, what you are quite wrong about," answered the legislator, "and if you had read my speech on the education question, you would understand that the fault is in our system, not in the sex, and that a good sound education and proper training, would make women as practical—"

"Ha!" cried Mr. Mullet, turning triumphantly to the ladies, "you hear—you see!"

"Now, Mullet, do let me finish," cried Jonnes, "practical, I say, as men. Why shouldn't women be doctors, lawyers, and parsons here as they are in America? In Dahomey—a savage country—they are soldiers. In Italy they are navvies; in polite France and intellectual Germany they are farm-labourers—in fact, husbandmen—"

"And here they are something better—

husband*women*," broke in Colonel Dashwood, "at least they all have a chance of it."

"Yes," cried Lady Clara, "a chance of marrying some monster like you."

"Half soldier, half marine," simpered Jessie.

"And all perfection," smiled Annie.

"I *am* glad that is your opinion, Miss Blandford, because I can return the compliment," retorted the guardsman, gallantly.

"Stuff, Dashwood, do let me finish," cried Jonnes. "To fit a woman for these vocations—to put her on an equality with man—she must undergo proper training; and by training I not only mean a mental process, but a bodily. She must be taught to run, row, climb, jump, and wrestle."

"Jonnes wants to pass all this off for original," said Colonel Dashwood, "when, in fact, it is nothing but a reversal of the old propositiou of selling the mangle, and buying a piano. Jonnes votes that it is the piano that the ladies should sell, and that the proceeds should be expended on a mangle."

"We are allowing them to go quite away from the subject," said Annie, to Lady Clara, "and Mr. Mullet wisely keeps silence, instead of saying why he ordered the carriage to come for us at twelve o'clock, when it should have been here half an hour before."

"Very neatly put, for one of the fair sex," cried Mr. Mullet; "so much so, that you almost convert me to Jonnes's theory, Miss Blandford, and I begin to think of a course of mangle for you. But you have started from a blunder, as a lady ought to. Now I sent the coachman his orders through Garnet, Lady Clara's maid, and, being a woman, she naturally told him he was to be here at twelve, when I said he was to be at Sandgate at that hour."

"Oh! oh!" from the three ladies, with one voice.

"Never shake your lovely locks at me. Thou can'st not say 'twas I! The blunder wasn't mine."

"Didn't I tell you to wait till I came?" demanded Lady Clara. "What do you say to that?"

"Why, I say you are a very clever woman, but as for remembering from one hour to another, you can't do it; not from any defect; no! no! but because a woman can't be practical. You positively told me NOT to wait for you after twelve!"

"There!" cried the ladies with their previous unanimity, and looking at each other.

"Moreover," resumed Mr. Mullet—"but now we must go in to dinner."

CHAPTER XIII.

PLOTTERS.

Charles Harrifield continued his stroll up the cliff, and, at the summit, came suddenly on Ravel and Mr. Mockright, accompanied by the Mockright ladies. Of course he joined the party, and they stood a few moments, and admired the prospect, one of the finest our coast affords. They then moved on together, and Harrifield found himself walking with Mrs. Mockright and Jane.

Mrs. Mockright knew it was a trying moment for Jane, and lingered at her side, as well to afford her time to rally as to save appearances. Nature had not endued her with the ten talents, but mothers grew in-

spired under the instinct matrimonial, and the emergency proved her equal to this manœuvre. Harrifield's blue blood indeed inspired her with awe, but the feeling moderated before his easy manners and her own excitement. Jane herself made no sign, but her mother felt confidence in her abilities in a *tête-à-tête* with Harrifield, and presently contrived to leave them together.

Unfortunately she over-estimated Jane. Though the bully of the family, Miss Mockright lost her head with strangers, and found it difficult to open her lips; so she would have hopelessly floundered if Harrifield had not advanced to her rescue. Not that her nervousness was a disadvantage on this occasion. Harrifield's jaded spirit loved change; and accustomed to women with the gift of tongues, and who were polished to the pitch of brass, he welcomed the novelty of a good-looking girl who seemed afraid to say her soul was her own. The flattery of such attentions encouraged Jane, and seeing the coronet of the future, she grew bolder, and finally became very conversable.

"By the way," said Harrifield, as they neared the town, "is your brother here, or have you found it impossible to lure him from his occupation of reading the newspapers in the Temple?"

"He isn't so faithful to the Temple as you suppose," answered Jane. "He has come down with us, but, fortunately, doesn't favour us with much of his company."

"Why fortunately? I am afraid you are a little cynical."

"Oh! don't think that," pleaded Jane, alarmed for her amiability. "I was only jesting, you know, as I am very fond of Alfred—and all that, you know. But he has taken to being so dismal, and it has provoked me a little, because we have naturally come out to enjoy ourselves."

"Of course. And the dismals are catching."

"Really? Well, I do think I should get low-spirited if I were to be much with Alfred; for he hardly speaks a word, and he looks as if he was going to a funeral. Mamma says she is sure he has something on his mind."

"And what does he say himself?"

"He says he hasn't."

"That's plain-speaking. A man can have only one thing on his mind—namely, want of cash, and that is a point on which he usually unburthens himself to a mamma, I should be inclined to think your brother's mind is all right. Your mamma should go a little deeper down, and sound his heart. The poor fellow may be in love."

Jane tittered at this suggestion. "I wonder if he is!" she said. "And who can it be, and why doesn't he tell her?"

"You want to deal out poetic justice at once," replied Harrifield. "Don't you see that if he were to tell the lady, ten to one she would accept him, and then he would never know the happiness of a lover's misery. But here he is, and not looking so woe-begone, I think."

There was, indeed, nothing in Alfred's appearance, as he came in sight, to indicate either mental or bodily suffering. He wore a grave air, it is true, but this might pass unnoted by a casual observer; for one's eye

lighted rather on his ruddy complexion and stalwart form. He met the party quietly, and showed no inclination to remain in their company, alleging that he was on his way to rifle practice at Hythe.

"So you are a volunteer, then?" said Harrifield. "I thought you were in the nautical line, and great at Putney. I know that was your forte at Cambridge."

"I do a little still with the skulls," replied Alfred; "but I am also in the 1st Surrey; and since I came here, and saw what goes on at Hythe, I have taken to the rifle more."

And with a smile and wave of the hand, he passed on; and the party resumed its march in the other direction. The movement threw Arabella Chowler and Ada Mockright in the rear, and the position inspired Arabella with a notion in relation to what her mother would call her "object."

"I should like to take another turn on the cliff, dear Ada," she said, fondling Ada's hand. "There is a path back through the fields, and I can go round that way, and

join you again in the road, and none of them be the wiser."

"I will go with you," replied Ada.

"Oh, then it will be noticed," returned Arabella. "You keep behind them, and if they miss me, you can say I am coming on. Do, pet—for your own Arry! But I know you will."

She slipped away, and left Ada undecided, and requiring to be propitiated by signs of fondness, which Arabella turned round to telegraph. She nearly fell over the cliff in this performance, but happily stayed on the verge, and discovered her danger; so she sped on, without looking back again, and bent only on overtaking Alfred. A few steps carried her round a bluff, forming one boundary of a nook, and terminating her chase; for there a seat had tempted Alfred to linger, and he sat contemplating the sea.

Arabella gave a little start at the sight, and her face flushed, the surprise affecting her like detection. But the blush was a pretty one, and harmonised with good brown eyes and soft brown hair, though her beauty

partook of the fat order, and was not of a kind to bear pulling to pieces.

"How you startled me, Alfred!" she said, with a half-smile. "And it is rather strange, too, I noticed this seat as we passed, and thought how I should like to sit here awhile, and watch the sea. And the same fancy seems to have struck you."

"I was just resting a moment," replied Alfred, rising, "but I—"

"There, now, you are going away because I have come. I do believe you hate me." And Arabella's voice glided into a tremor.

"You can't really think so," said Alfred, with an air of concern. "I assure you, I was just thinking of moving, and your coming would naturally be an inducement to stay, if I hadn't made another engagement."

"What matter about another engagement? You have got into a way lately of making polite speeches, a thing you never used to do—at least, never to me. Not that I care about them. I wouldn't give t*oo*pence ha*lph*penny"—here Arabella felt

that she made a great hit in pronunciation—"for a bushel of them. Now do sit down a minute." And she took a seat herself, as Alfred complied. "I *will* have you tell me how I have offended you, because it has made me unhappy." And Arabella averted her face, to call attention to her emotion.

"My dear Miss Chowler—"

"There, what have I done to be called Miss Chowler. I hate the name of Chowler. Why can't you call me Arabella, as you used to do?"

And the brown eyes turned reproachfully on Alfred, then fell abashed.

"Well, Arabella, how is it possible you could offend me? I assure you I have nothing but good feeling towards you."

"Then why have you avoided me so the last few weeks, and particularly since we came down here. It has made me feel myself quite in the way."

"I ask you a thousand pardons, and am ashamed that, from something having troubled me, I have been inattentive to our friends, but forgive me, and—"

"You won't do it again," said Arabella. "Well, we will shake hands and be friends." And she extended her hand, which, being small and well-shaped, and withal delicately white, she spread out, and made as prominent as possible.

"And now I must run away," said Alfred; "or I sha'n't be back in time for dinner."

"I will walk with you along the cliff."

"Rather let me walk back to the corner with you; for I leave the cliff at the next path, as the waggonette is waiting for me on the road."

"The waggonette! Why didn't you ask Ada and me to take a drive with you, you churlish man?"

"Would you like to go?"

"Oh! do take me!" exclaimed Arabella, suddenly stopping and placing a hand on each of his arms, while she looked up in his face.

"With the greatest pleasure," he replied. "You arrange it with Ada, and we'll go over to-morrow, if it is fine."

This was not what Arabella had thought

of: she wished Alfred to carry her off at once; but he seemed to have undergone some transformation — to have suddenly passed from a rollicking youngster into a man, and she could not explain herself as she would have done a few weeks before. Nor, on second thoughts, did it appear discreet to run away with him in this manner, while under the eye of his family. On the other hand, no one would see an objection to Alfred's own proposition, and this, though not all she desired, left her a good opportunity, as Ada did not see things with half an eye, like Jane. So she showed no disappointment, and allowed Alfred to depart, after a leave-taking which she protracted to the utmost.

He never looked back, as *she* did, and her face clouded, as she walked away.

CHAPTER XIV.

PREPARING FOR DINNER.

Woman proposes, but man *dis*poses. Arabella was disappointed of her jaunt to Hythe on the morrow; for Mr. Mockright had invited Charles Harrifield to dinner, and determined to make a display: so he dispatched his butler to Surbiton for his gold plate, and Alfred to London for a set of diamonds for Jane. Mrs. Mockright counselled a quiet entertainment, urging the deficiences of a hired house; but her husband retorted that it was all a matter of money, that he had bought his gold plate to show, not to keep it locked in a chest, and that no occasion could be more suitable for its production than the present. At the same time, he recom-

mended the lady to mind her own business, and leave him to mind his, delivering his dictum so emphatically, that she feared to reply in words and only indicated her sentiments by a majestic look as she stalked out of the room.

Alfred returned in the afternoon, but Jane stayed out late with Arabella; and only received the diamonds when she went to her toilet. Arabella, meanwhile, had been obliged to dress before the time, as she required the services of Jane's maid, and now she sat in her own room awaiting the moment for descent to the drawing-room. She appeared to be employed in working the cover of a pincushion, intended as a seasonable gift to a married friend, but the task was abandoned when, after a slamming of doors, profound quiet proclaimed Jane and Ada in their dressing-room. Now safe from interruption, she made another preparation for dinner, dictated by her wish to appear a small eater before Alfred, and for which the means the gods provided, through the shops in High street, took the shape of a two-penny

loaf and some German sausage, with a pear for filling up. All was eaten convulsively, as every movement in the house vibrated through her frame, but Arabella felt none the less comfortable when the eatables were down. Not a moment too soon did she drop the crumbs into her mouth, and wipe her ruby lips. There now came a rustling at the door, and her heart gave a jump as it opened; for a glance at the mirror disclosed the remnant of the German sausage, carelessly left on the toilet-table. But admirable was her presence of mind: she saw the right thing to do, and did it, encasing the sausage in the pincushion cover, and thus delivered, she faced her visitor with a breath of relief.

It was Jane, so impatient to show her diamonds, that she came from the next room half-dressed, or rather half-*un*dressed.

"Are they not magnificent?" she said advancing to the glass and swinging the rings in her ears, at the same time holding out her bare arm, decorated with a bracelet.

Arabella fell into raptures, though the bare arm reminded her of the sausage.

"It would set them off very much if I wore a plume of feathers," remarked Jane, already feeling Countess of Bramblecourt.

"Then you *would* look splendid," concurred Arabella.

Jane moved her head, something in the style of a plumed horse, and the glass showed her the imagined feathers nodding.

"You'll kill Mr. Harrifield to-night," continued Arabella, with a smile.

"I shall eat him if I do—being at dinner," tittered Jane, in high spirits, and her best humour. "But I don't want to kill anyone."

"Then why are you so captivating, you saucy!"

This made Jane laugh. "Go along with you," she said, giving Arabella a push.

The mysterious vestments of ladyhood are not fashioned for such gambols, and the movement broke some fastening, which called for the substitution of a pin, and Jane stretched her hand towards the seeming cushion.

"Here's a pin," half screamed Arabella, breathless, and dashing her hand before the

point of danger: "that cushion is only one I am working for a friend."

"What an odd shape it is—just like a large sausage roll!" cried Jane, merrily.

Arabella's face flamed, but she forced a laugh.

"It isn't finished yet," she said: "so no more remarks if you please, Miss Quiz. Remember, it is almost time we were down."

She playfully led Jane to the door, paying her tribute in compliments till she shut her out.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANQUET.

Dinner found the young ladies radiant, Jane in gems, and Arabella and Ada in smiles. The party included but two guests, Harrifield, and Mr. Ravel—for in consideration of the project in hand, the lawyer was invited, though Mr. Mockright, as he paid him fees, regarded him as little more than his hired servant. The sumptuousness of the dinner surprised Harrifield. Usually, he observed little at such gatherings, but the display here was, in points that met his taste, ministering as well to the palate as the eye, and he appreciated both the exquisite cooking, and the rare wines, as well as the array of servants, the gold plate, and

Jane's diamonds. Few natures are superior to the influence of glitter, and, in this case, Harrifield had not the counterpoise of an honest passion—at most cherishing only fancies, so he came more and more to look at marriage in a brokerage light, even to persuade himself that with nothing but a weighted patrimony to sustain a high position, he owed it to his possible descendants to sacrifice personal considerations, and marry for money. Personal considerations, however, instead of being sacrificed, exercised but too much influence on his decision, and wealth seemed a nice thing for himself as well as his posterity.

Nevertheless, his eye, if reconciled to Jane, showed little admiration when it turned on Mr. and Mrs. Mockright, the lady appearing stiffer than usual in brocade, whilst the gentleman suggested a prize alderman. Mr. Mockright soon warned him that he was not to be looked at with impunity; for he had notions of hospitality special to himself, and never caught Harrifield's glance without calling out "A glass

of wine with you, sir!" Harrifield thought to escape by raising his glass to his lips, but Mr. Mockright knew what ought to be done, and always invoked the butler—"Now, you, there! fill Mr. Harrifield's glass." At last, Harrifield was afraid to look up, and gave a start whenever Mr. Mockright spoke, at the same time trying to ward off his attentions by talking incessantly to Jane.

Jane knew her father's deficiency in polish, but had never realised it so painfully as now, when she felt the grandeur of diamonds, and sat by an Earl presumptive. Her cheek glowed for both her parents, and she resolved to invite them to Bramblecourt as seldom as possible, and only in the absence of all visitors. At the same time, she strove to divert Harrifield's attention from their lapses by centring it on herself; and from the way he maintained the conversation, she seemed to succeed in her design.

"Your brother appears to have got the better of his ailment, whether it was of the mind or heart," he said, after a time, "for he is cheerful enough, now."

"Yes, cheerful," replied Jane; "but—that is, you see, there is something wanting, I don't know what."

"He isn't so rollicking—that is all; and that goes in favour of my argument, that the part affected was the heart. Perhaps his partner there could tell something about it."

"*She!*" smiled Jane, contemptuously.

"Worse-looking girls have done more mischief, or I ought to say, more execution. But ladies never give each other credit in this department."

"It would be no credit to Arabella Chowler to have designs on my brother—such a *mésalliance!*"

The word made Harrifield wince.

"I don't suspect her of designs—far from it," he rejoined. "I think she isn't the sort of girl for that. A girl with designs is seldom fat."

"You are quizzing her now," said Jane, with admiring smile. "But I own we don't consider her dangerous, or we shouldn't have taken her up, you know."

Nevertheless, Jane resolved that Arabella should now be taken *down*, and, further, that she would keep watch on her proceedings, and interpose if she saw any angling for Alfred. But Arabella did not show her cards at the dinner-table. Her demeanour evinced no preference for Alfred, and it was only at favourable intervals that she talked to him apart.

"I was so disappointed to-day," she said, in the first of these asides. "Ada and I thought to have had such a nice drive with you to Hythe."

"Didn't my father take you?" replied Alfred. "He told me he would; and as I couldn't refuse to undertake the commission he gave me, I hoped to escape blame."

"Oh! there is nothing to blame you about. How do you think I could blame *you?*" And Arabella glanced a tender reproach.

"I felt you would make allowance for the circumstances, and was the more easy, as you would have the drive, after all."

"I am glad you made yourself easy about

it, but you were quite wrong in your supposition."

"What, didn't my father take you?"

"He offered to, but—" here Arabella dropped her eyes — "I didn't care about going."

This seemed such a contradiction to her previous speech, that it puzzled Alfred, and Arabella felt annoyed at his want of penetration. Her chase, indeed, was kindling other feelings in her breast than the desire to make a brilliant marriage, and she began to care for Alfred himself. On him her mind was running, while she chatted with Mr. Ravel and Ada, or spoke across the table to Jane, digressions to which she was driven partly by policy, and partly by abstraction in Alfred, who, though exerting himself to talk, had occasional relapses of quiet. One of these silent fits she invaded without being noted by Jane.

"What will you take for your thoughts?" she said, with a smile.

"I beg your pardon," replied Alfred. "I am afraid I was wandering?"

"Where to; if it is a fair question?"

"Well, what do you think of Jericho?"

"I know better than that, and won't be put off by it. You were somewhere within a hundred miles of Folkestone—possibly Surbiton."

"I plead guilty to Surbiton."

"That makes me curious to know what part of it, whether the city or country. But I needn't *asc;* for your looks showed you were—were—"

"In the woods!" suggested Alfred.

"Or the *lanes,*" rejoined Arabella, with a quick look up, remembering her mother's story about Langley-lane.

Alfred changed colour, but a remark from Ada drew off Arabella's attention at this moment, and extended the conversation to herself and Ravel.

Mr. Mockright had drunk himself into loquacity by the time the ladies retired, and became confidential, verifying the adage that "when wine is in, wit is out." He told Harrifield that he intended to go into Parliament. Ravel knew how it could be done,

and, for that matter, Harrifield should go in, too, if he liked. Further, he announced that he was driving a railway through the Bramblecourt estate, which would bring it in communication with half England, and greatly enhance its value. True, Lord Bramblecourt opposed the project, and threatened to throw it out in the House of Lords—but they knew what that meant: it was a matter of money; and Harrifield, who had such an interest in the estate, might depend on his pulling the thing through, both by bringing Lord Bramblecourt to reason, and making the railway board knuckle down. He concluded by saying "A glass of wine with you, sir," and, as the butler establishment had retired with the ladies, filled Harrifield a bumper himself.

The gentlemen reached the drawing-room at last. The wine had affected Mrs. Mockright in just the opposite manner to her lord, and she seemed afraid to open her lips, but she had an impression that the party would be a dull affair without conversation, and

this must, therefore, be provided. Vain were it to look for a supply from her daughters, for they both were inclined to dumbness; wherefore she rested her hopes on Arabella.

"Talk," she said to that young lady, the moment the gentlemen appeared.

Arabella was nothing loth, and turned to Harrifield, who stood between her and Jane, drawing Jane out. He found the process difficult, as Jane, on coming into the drawing-room, had fallen into a dreamy state, revolving her future greatness—seeing herself at court, and moving in a procession of balls, receptions, and other splendours; and she could not collect herself at first. But suddenly she remembered her intention of talking down Arabella; the moment was favourable, and she saw an opportunity of showing off to Harrifield, and teaching Arabella her place at the same time.

"I want to have a chat with you about the Paris Exhibition, Mr. Harrifield," said Arabella, in obedience to Mrs. Mockright's injunction.

"Then you will make an exhibition of

yourself," remarked Jane, with a sarcastic smile, "for you have never been to Paris, and so can know nothing about it."

"You are so droll, Jane, you always make one *laf*," replied Arabella, with a propitiatory titter.

"Arabella Chowler never laughs," observed Jane to Harrifield: "she *lafs*."

"I am bound to say that whatever she does, she does it in a very agreeable manner," answered Harrifield.

"Yes, she certainly tries to be agreeable," rejoined Jane, colouring a little, and half smiling, half sneering—"it is very good policy, isn't it, Arabella?"

"I believe it is good manners," said Arabella, with something like dignity.

But Jane did not wait for the retort. Arabella had given her the cue of exhibitions, and she led Harrifield into a discussion on Madame Tussaud's, asking if he had noticed that the figure of Cobbett there wagged its head. Harrifield confessed that he had missed this performance, and doubted if it could be connected with Cobbett, as the

invention belonged to Lord Burleigh; and Jane then wondered that such a thing could be done by a nobleman. Meanwhile, Arabella, sitting silent and out of spirits, was startled from her reverie by a voice not loud but deep.

"Talk!" and Mrs. Mockright rustled past.

But neither Arabella nor Jane could longer enchain Harrifield. His powers of endurance were exhausted; he made a desperate rush at the host and hostess, bade them good night, and effected his escape from the house.

Arrived at the Pavilion, he found on his table two cards, inscribed respectively with the words—"Mr. Mullet" "Lady Clara Mullet;" and he sat down, muttering "more bores!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FURTHER TOILS.

The days were passing on, and Arabella did not advance in her love-plot. Alfred was very attentive, but not more so to her than to his mother and sisters, and she noticed that he showed the same consideration for everybody, except in his moments of abstraction. These mysterious moments she could not understand. Some days they were of the briefest, and she began to hope they would never return, when suddenly Alfred became more absent than ever. Nor was this her only puzzle. He had improved in manners, in his sociable moods he talked better, and he devoted a good deal of time to reading. She felt that he had more claims

to be admired, and that the change made her like him more, but still she would rather he had remained as he was. Formerly, he seemed accessible to her powers of captivation, which were rough and ready, and hence in assimilation with him. But now he must be worked upon by sentiment. What interested him before he now viewed with indifference, or spoke of only when questioned, and she knew not, therefore, by what avenue he could be approached. One thing sustained her hopes; he had become humble, and seemed to consider himself of little mark. Here she might find a standpoint; and by letting him see that she thought him superior to all others—that she looked up to him, and loved him, she might carry him by surprise.

But, in reality, she was too impatient for this process. She must effect a capture before she returned home, or, at least, make an impression, and the situation called for active measures. Could she be certain, that she interested Alfred—that she had inspired him with ever so small a partiality, the rest might,

indeed, be left to time. But how was this to be ascertained? She could not pique him into a demonstration; for as Jane monopolised Harrifield, and Mr. Ravel looked unmanageable, there was nobody she could use to make him jealous, and how else could he be drawn out? Not till after much cogitation did she hit on a device. Beaux were wanting, but might they not be invented? We know that Arabella could digest a fib, and this idea no sooner rose in her mind than she resolved to put it in practice.

She found an opportunity in the morning walk. Jane had led the Mockright family to the pier, hoping to be seen by Harrifield from the Pavilion, and her eyes were so attracted in that direction, that she became remiss in her watch over Arabella and Alfred. Thus she allowed Alfred to remain at the end of the pier, as the party turned back, and here Arabella took care to join him, notifying her presence by a faint sigh.

"How vast a thing is the sea!" she observed, raising her eyes as he looked round.

"It is calm now, and the waves play at our feet, but to-morrow they may be lashed by a storm. We see it as far as the horizon, but beyond all is unknown."

She had made a good beginning in sentiment; the tone of melancholy in her words suited Alfred.

"Beyond and between, too," he said; "for we perceive only the surface, and don't know what is beneath—what rocks and depths, and what swarming life. Remember Schiller's Diver. But it is the same everywhere—wherever we look or turn; all is unknown!"

"That is just what I feel, only you express it so well, that it almost seems new to me!"

They were silent a moment.

"Tell me something more, Alfred," Arabella then said.

Alfred smiled. "I have nothing to tell," he replied, "at least in the Jaques' vein, all my discoveries being familiar to other people."

"I wouldn't hear you so misrepresented

by any one else, I can tell you," rejoined Arabella. "I know that you just now spoke to my inner harmonies, as it were—the instincts, I mean, that open souls to each other." Here Arabella half sighed, "I was thinking how like the sea is to one's life, and you described it in a manner that—that just hit it, you know. What is a girl at eighteen but a boat, floating on the waves, as it were, on an unknown expanse, borne upon it by the tide, without knowing where she is going."

"Perhaps she may be at sea all her life," said Alfred, now rather amused; "only she can keep near the shore, if she likes, you know."

"Stick at home, you mean. Isn't it better to seek destiny? Not but what a gurl may never leave her mamair's apron-strings, and the waves will reach her, for they have reached me. Yes, I feel myself borne along—I am among the rocks and depths you mentioned, and what am I to do?"

"You have a safe pilot in your mamma."

"But there are things I can't tell mamair

—things here," Arabella pressed her bosom ; " and it is precisely these things that decide the course of one's life." She paused an instant, as if in perplexity ; then said, " I wish you would give me your advice, Alfred."

" I am very incompetent to advise you in anything of importance," returned Alfred, gravely.

" Well, it is of importance, and it isn't—for what matter what becomes of *me!* Nobody cares, and I don't care myself—only I don't want to hurt the feelings of other people. So if I could see my duty—*that* is what I want!"

" Exactly, but you mustn't think nobody cares for you. You have, I am sure, troops of friends."

Arabella shook her head.

" No. But my duty—this is a case in which my duty is the difficulty." Here another pause. " Alfred, I have had an offer of marriage."

" I am really very glad to hear it, Arabella, and congratulate you with all my heart."

"I don't know that it is a matter for congratulation," rejoined Arabella, with a tremor in her tone—"in point of feeling, I mean; for I care nothing for worldly advantages, or I should be satisfied. The gentleman's only a curate, now, indeed, but he will have a living soon, and he is good-looking, and all that; but the difficulty is, I don't care about him."

Alfred remembered his rejection by Annie, and his face flushed. This seemed to Arabella a sign favourable to herself, and revived her hopes.

"Duty must be my guide," she continued. "Let us but do our duty, and whatever our sacrifices—whatever our pain and anguish, though they embitter our whole life, we shall have our reward."

This seemed a dubious prospect to Alfred, but he made no remark; for Arabella only drew breath ere she said—"What do you think is my duty?"

"Since you ask me," replied Alfred, speaking low, "I think you should give your suitor time to show his character, not

judge him by first appearances—that is, if there is no other objection to the match."

"None, there can be none—except my own feelings."

"Your feelings may change."

"Impossible."

"You don't know, and, at any rate, it would be generous to give him a trial."

"Alfred, my feelings never change. They are devoted to some one else"—Arabella averted her head—"some one who doesn't care for me, but I can't help that. There are people who think little of themselves, and don't know how they are worshipped, and he is one of them. But if you tell me it is my duty to accept this offer, when I don't care for the—the—" Arabella could not think of the right word, so jerked out "the offerer, but do care for somebody, then I—no, no! I can't accept him."

"Then it will be better to tell him so at once," said Alfred, with a little trace of agitation, "though it will be painful to you, and more painful to him. But here are Jane and Ada, coming back for us."

And he turned to meet his sisters, glad thus to cover his own emotion, and escape a theme too suggestive of painful memories. Arabella, on her part, believed that her first flight in sentiment had not wholly missed the mark.

CHAPTER XVII.

OVERTURE FROM MR. RAVEL.

Jessie Balcombe trembled to hear that Harrifield was to be a visitor under the same roof with herself; but she bent to necessity, and, since the event must be, considered whether she might not wrest it to purposes of her own. For she still halted between two opinions—between her project of marrying for a position, and her deep, secret passion for Harrifield. This brought her to favour the design of passing off Annie as Lady Clara's hired companion, because, in the first place, it deprived Annie of the advantage of social rank, one of the things that told on Harrifield, and, secondly, it might furnish some opportunity for striking in herself. For the present, she resolved

to keep out of the way. In time past, indeed, she had determined never to meet Harrifield again, but now she felt a longing to speak to him, and the little trick to be played respecting Annie, suggested to her the possibility of herself coming before him in some disguise, in which she would escape his recognition. Meanwhile, she could watch unobserved, or, at least, elicit what passed from Annie; for she decided to remain in her own room, on the plea of indisposition, and only stroll out for an airing early in the morning. Thus she would avoid encountering Harrifield, whom she knew to be a late riser.

But Folkestone held another person, of whom Jessie never thought, but whose thoughts often turned on her, and, as she was taking her early walk on the cliffs, she came suddenly on Mr. Ravel. The lawyer had not won her confidence by his cross-examination tone on Esher Common, and she would have passed with a bow, but he stood in the path, leaving no room between the verge of the cliff.

"I am most fortunate to meet you, Miss Balcombe," he said; and I take it as auspicious, too; for this very moment I was wishing I knew where to write to you."

"Indeed!" replied Jessie, surprised, and a little disturbed.

"Yes; and it will rest with you to decide whether our meeting shall establish more confidential relations between us. I can promise that you will find no one more zealous for your interests."

"I am not aware that my interests are in any danger," rejoined Jessie, with a freezing air. "Certainly, I am not in search of any person to look after them; and, if I were, I should hardly fix on one, who, you must excuse me for saying, is all but unknown to me."

"That doesn't make him less devoted to you, Miss Balcombe. You must be aware there are people for whom we are indisposed to stir a finger, though we have known them all their lives, while there are others who win us to their service by their first look. I shall not take the liberty to say more on

this point at present. You have reminded me of the footing on which we stand, and I had rather leave my appreciation of you to be shown by events than express it in words. I believe I shall not want opportunities."

"Your language is a little mysterious," said Jessie, gravely, "but it seems to be kindly meant, and if I ask you to speak more plainly, it is because I have this impression, and because your hints excite my curiosity."

"I am afraid the subject may be disagreeable to you on one point."

"You mean, you have discovered something about me?"

"Nothing that conveys a reproach—from which no one's career could be more free. It simply relates to your connection with Mr. Blandford."

"Yes; you are Mr. Blandford's solicitor."

"But it isn't from him that I learn what I know of you; for he never mentioned your name to me. I happen to be also the solicitor of another person, whose interests

are not identical with his, and it is in this capacity that I was led to the information I possess about you."

"I don't know who your other client may be, but if your information points to any link between him and me, it is misleading you."

"Perhaps, you will alter your opinion when I tell you that he is the presumptive heir to the estates held by Mr. Blandford—in fact, that he would now possess those estates, *if there were any flaw in Mr. Blandford's title.*"

"Flaw in his title!" repeated Jessie, fixing her eyes on the lawyer: "what do you mean?"

His gaze met hers, but she not only bore the scrutiny, but rather became the searcher, and his eyes dropped.

"I said *if*—I put a supposititious contingency," he said, a little embarrassed—"not but what there has been a rumour of the kind."

"Indeed?" said Jessie.

"You have never heard it, then?"

"I am not in the way of hearing rumours, nor should I attach any importance to such a story if it reached me."

"Am I to understand you could be of no use to my client?"

"Decidedly."

"Well, I have discharged a duty to him in speaking to you on the subject, and a duty also to my own conscience; and now I must beg you not to think I intended any treachery to Mr. Blandford. I should have relinquished the charge of his affairs if I had found the key to this mystery."

Again he looked at Jessie, but her face was the same pretty blank: he saw no key there.

"And this is all you have to say to me?" she remarked.

"At present it is, but we shall have further communications; and, meanwhile, I entreat you to think as favourably of me as you can."

He held out his hand, and Jessie did not refuse it, but there was nothing encouraging in her manner as she moved away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DANGEROUS GROUND.

Jessie reached home in a gloomy fit, and hoped to enter unobserved, but was seen in the lobby by Annie, who followed her into her room.

"You *have* been roaming early," cried the young girl, "and I am so glad; for I expected to find you with a bad headache or heartache. But it is a version of the old story—she went to the undertaker's to buy her a coffin, and when she came back, her friend was a-laughing."

"It is you who are laughing, Annie Blandford, as you always do at me," replied Jessie, petulantly.

"Now you are really angry. What is the matter with you?"

"What do you think?"

"I see my opinion won't please you, if I tell it; so I had better not commit myself."

"Ah! we know your way—insinuating what you are afraid to speak out."

Annie laughed. "Come, I am not afraid of you, anyhow," she said, slipping her arm round Jessie's waist. "You are not so formidable, though you are solemn, and I think I should be the victor, if we came to wrestle, as Mr. De Jonnes teaches."

"You are always teazing me," rejoined Jessie. And Annie saw tears in her eyes.

"It is because I want you to be cheerful, you Niobe." And she pressed Jessie to her bosom. "You are fretting and grieving when you might be happy, if you would only tear out the past."

"And memory with it," said Jessie. "You have never known sorrow yourself, so can't understand its duration, nor the scars it leaves behind. What I want is sympathy, and that you never give me."

Annie made no reply, except by prolonging her embrace, and Jessie continued

to complain, though in a tone that gradually softened.

"What do you wish me to do?" said Annie, at length. "I know you want something."

"And will you help me, dear Annie?"

"Don't I always help you?"

"Well, you do—only I am such a horrid temper I can't be civil to you for it. Now, do manage that I shall remain in my own rooms, without seeing anybody but you or Lady Clara," replied Jessie, "and, perhaps, I shall ask you something else before long."

Annie concluded a treaty on this basis, and afterwards brought Lady Clara into the arrangement, when Jessie was left in seclusion, to mature her design on Harrifield.

Annie and Lady Clara were full of their own project, and went through a rehearsal which threw Lady Clara in raptures. Fortunately Mr. Mullet had started on a yachting cruise, which would keep him from home for several days; and they thus escaped the risk of his blundering, while they had the stage to themselves.

"You mustn't mind Charles Harrifield making love to you, you know," observed Lady Clara, as they sat together in the drawing-room; "for he does that with every girl he meets."

"The monster!" exclaimed Annie. "But he will never have the audacity to attack me before you, and I shall take care to keep under your ægis."

"Then we shall lose half the fun," rejoined Lady Clara, remembering her compact with Mr. Blandford to promote a match between Harrifield and Annie. "I must go away, and leave you exposed to his arts."

"You terrify me!"

"Nonsense! Don't you see what a laugh we shall have at him, when he discovers your real position? I think it will cure him of making love at sight, and you will have all the credit of the miracle."

"But I don't want to pass for a conjuror.

"You will be an exorcist, and, perhaps, in casting out of him this evil spirit of love-making, you might implant a good spirit in its place."

"Don't dream of such a thing! Now pray promise not to leave us!"

"Hush!" said Lady Clara. "I hear his voice."

The door opened as she spoke, and a servant announced the expected visitor.

Harrifield advanced eagerly to Lady Clara, but started as he perceived Annie.

"My companion, Miss Staunton!" said Lady Clara, carelessly. "But you seem to have met her before?"

"I have had that pleasure," replied Harrifield, as he bent to Annie.

Annie could not repress a blush. The affair had taken a turn from which she shrank, her delicacy being alarmed at the element of Harrifield's lovemaking. But Lady Clara now forced her on, and, as she acted her part, she gradually kindled in the performance, and forgot all beside.

"Miss Staunton, ring the bell, please," said Lady Clara, after a little chat with Harrifield.

"Pray allow me," cried Harrifield, starting up.

"Now do keep your seat, Charles, and don't fidget," returned Lady Clara, with a half-frown. "Miss Staunton can surely ring the bell without your assistance."

"But I thought to save her the trouble."

"You are too polite, sir. It is my book of photographs I want, Miss Staunton; and, now I remember, it is in the other room, so we sha'n't require the servant. You can go for it."

"Certainly, Lady Clara," answered Annie, passing to the further chamber.

"Is it the book with your monogram on the cover?" asked Harrifield of Lady Clara.

"Yes."

"Then I can unearth it directly, if you will intrust me with the mission."

"I shall intrust you with no such thing, and I beg you won't be fussing about my companion, or you will turn her head. I have no doubt she thinks quite enough of herself."

"No doubt, or she is an exception to humanity in general, and her own sex in particular. But why do you have a pretty girl, if one isn't to be civil to her?"

"Be as civil as you please, but I will have no flirting. Besides, I don't consider her pretty."

"Do you think I am so unreasonable as to expect it of you? Who ever heard of one woman admiring another, particularly when she is a beauty herself?"

"It is well you put that in, but I won't be sugared over, Mr. Flummery. And here is Miss Staunton back, so drop the subject, if you please."

Annie entered with heightened colour, which rendered her more charming than before—at least, in Harrifield's estimation.

"I can't find the book, Lady Clara," she said, demurely.

"Not find it!" cried Lady Clara. "You must be blind, Miss Staunton; for, as you entered the room, it stared you in the face."

"Very naturally, if it has any eyes," murmured Harrifield.

"I assure you, I made a thorough search, Lady Clara," returned Annie; "and I must have seen it, if it had been there."

"Don't be so positive, Miss Staunton. You are always contradicting me."

Annie assumed a look of submission.

"Really, I never knew you so pettish, Clara," said Harrifield, apart: "I may even say, so savage. I didn't think it was in you."

"And I never suspected you of being a lecturer: see how long we may remain ignorant of each other's merits. But I shall go for the book myself, and you will see how easily it is found."

She proceeded towards the inner chamber, and Annie was following, when Lady Clara, with an air of hauteur, declined her attendance. But Annie remembered she was only going to the next room, and, as the door stood open, thought herself still under protection, so was reconciled to remaining. The inner room, however, had another door, and by this Lady Clara stole out on the staircase, and was tripping lightly up, when she encountered Jessie.

"I am venturing down for the book you lent me," said Jessie.

"Hush!" whispered Lady Clara, laughingly. "Charles Harrifield is here, and I

have run away, and left him and Annie together. He is smitten already, and is sure to make love to her."

"Are they in the drawing-room?" asked Jessie, without seeming interested.

"Yes."

"Then I can't get my book; for I left it in the little room."

"Oh, slip in at the side-door, the way I came out. They won't hear you, and if they do, they will think it is I. I shall go up to the nursery, and see the children, and be down again before Annie can be carried off."

She ran up the stairs, while Jessie stood meditating. Here, unsought, was an opportunity of ascertaining Annie's disposition towards Harrifield; for the situation was one that must draw her into a disclosure, either favouring his advances, or repelling.

Jessie shrank from the meanness of listening; but there was the temptation, and she yielded. She reached the little room, as Harrifield, under a kindred impulse, glided up to Annie in the drawing-room. Annie

could not retreat, but resolved to be deaf, believing that Lady Clara's presence in the next room, and the open door, would prevent Harrifield from speaking out.

"I hope my cousin is not often in these tempers," said Harrifield, in the low tone she anticipated.

"I beg your pardon," replied Annie. "Will you kindly speak a little louder?"

"This is not the time for loud speaking," smiled Harrifield. "Let me take advantage of the moment to assure you of my sympathy and devotion!"

"I must ask you to speak in your natural voice, if you will be so good."

Harrifield was amazed to find her deaf, remembering that she had shown no sign of this infirmity at their last meeting, nor when recently talking to Lady Clara, but then he reflected that on neither of these occasions had she been addressed in a whisper.

"Forgive me," he said, in a slightly higher key, "but I am afraid of being overheard. Pray listen, and I will speak slow.

I—have—loved — you — from —the — moment—I—first—saw—you,—hap-py—moment!"

"It is vain for me to try to make any sense of what you say," replied Annie. "I must give it up."

"At least, you will understand me now," murmured Harrifield, sinking on his knee and seizing her hand.

Annie understood so well, that she thought it time to follow Lady Clara, and broke away, retreating to the inner room.

Great was her surprise to find Lady Clara gone, and the room apparently empty; for Jessie, hearing a movement, had taken refuge under a small table, which offered a position for listening, while the scarlet table-cover promised to screen her from observation. Meanwhile, Harrifield followed Annie into the room.

"What, the bird flown!" he exclaimed, noting Lady Clara's absence. "Then I needn't resort to dumbshow any longer to express the sentiments you have inspired in me, Miss Staunton, though language itself

seems dumb when I give them utterance. You hear me now—ah, say you listen!"

"I listen, because I can't avoid it," replied Annie.

"Is that all the grace you extend to me?"

"If you call it a grace, but I don't, as I should be sorry to give the smallest encouragement to professions which Mr. Harrifield has made to fifty others."

"Fifty!"

"That is the number, if report is to be relied on."

"Report is *not* to be relied on," rejoined Harrifield. And he added in a grave tone—"I love you, Miss Staunton—I never knew till now how much, though I have thought of you continually, and sought for you, too. These are not the compliments you taunt me with, which are tendered to pretty flirts, and forgotten as soon as uttered. They are the outpourings of my heart, and tell you no more than I feel."

"If I am not to call them empty professions, you can deny that you have ever pro-

fessed as much to anyone before. I shall then withdraw the imputation."

Jessie, who had not lost a word, here held her breath.

"Well," answered Harrifield, "I can say I—that is—" he stopped, and Jessie breathed again.

"That is, you can't say it, sir," rejoined Annie; "and I retain my first opinion. But my impressions are of no consequence to you, and what you may do is of none to me—only you must, if you please, leave me unnoticed for the future."

Harrifield would have resisted this conclusion, but was prevented by the return of Lady Clara, who now appeared from the drawing-room, having entered the other way.

"Why what are you doing here, Miss Staunton?" she demanded, with affected surprise.

"I believe Miss Staunton came to look for you, and I followed," cried Harrifield. "And now I can only ask how you have managed to elude us both, and where you come from?"

"You are so polite that I must remind you that I went to look for my photographs," answered Lady Clara; "and I have come from the nursery."

"Ah! there you found your photographs."

Lady Clara smiled. "I forgive you for that joke," she said: "it is so exquisitely bad."

"I see the book, now, Lady Clara," cried Annie: "it has fallen off the table."

She stooped down, and uttered a cry of surprise, discerning Jessie under the table.

"What is the matter?" cried Lady Clara and Harrifield together.

"I—I wish you would lead me into the next room," said Annie, fearing they would discover Jessie.

Lady Clara took her arm, and was now all tenderness, helping her into the drawing-room closely attended by Harrifield. Here they placed her in a chair of down, and she pretended to rally.

"There, you had better go, Charles Harrifield, and come in to-morrow," said Lady Clara. "I see she must be kept very quiet."

Harrifield reluctantly departed; and Annie became perfectly well, which greatly amused Lady Clara. Annie did not mention either Harrifield's declaration of love or her discovery of Jessie, though she gave a diverting account of her assumption of deafness. Lady Clara perceived that she kept something back, and she determined to learn what it was from Harrifield himself.

CHAPTER XIX.

WOMEN IN COUNCIL.

Jessie was in agony till Annie got Lady Clara and Harrifield into the drawing-room, when she quitted her covert, and flew to her own room. Her heart heaved with emotion, and she knew not whether to be glad or sorry: for what she had heard was of mixed import. It relieved her of at least one cause for disquiet, as she no longer saw a rival in Annie. Harrifield, it is true, professed to love Annie, but Annie did not care for him, and eventually he would be repelled by her disdain. At the same time, he had refused to deny a previous attachment, which Jessie felt persuaded referred to his love for her—his first love, of all feelings

the most enduring. Perhaps, she need but present herself to revive this passion—to bring back its sensibilities, if not its romance. This all still glowed in her own bosom: why should it not in his, so much nobler, so free from the deceptions that debased herself?

Thus can love bring woman to magnify her own blemishes, and ignore the man's. Had no deception been practised by Harrifield when he won her heart with honeyed words, and thought of her only as a toy? She now fancied she had been precipitate at that time—that she had fled from him too hastily and judged him harshly—but why had she fled, and what would have been her fate had she remained? Alas! the fire rekindled in her bosom, after years of suppression, by his mere appearance, showed how completely she would have been at his mercy. But she asked herself no questions as to the past. She thought solely of the future—of the present; and her dream for the moment was to reinstate herself in his affections, and become his for ever.

In following these reflections, she shaped

a plan of action, which had previously been floating in her mind, but in a vague form, and rather as a thing to be wished than realized. The meditation was interrupted by Annie, who entered the room laughing ; and Jessie, guessing the cause, echoed her merriment.

"How cleverly you managed, dear, seeing me so unexpectedly, yet keeping secret," she said, with a caress. "Now if it had been I, I should have cried out, and betrayed you."

"But how came you there ?" asked Annie.

"Lady Clara told me I should find my book on the table, and just as I was taking it up, I heard you and Mr. Harrifield coming. I didn't wish to be seen, and there was no time to reach the door, so I crept under the table."

"Then you heard his declaration ?" said Annie a little confused, but still laughing.

"Oh, yes ! and your answer—a very sensible one, and which rated his declaration at its exact value."

"Do you know I half thought whether he might not be serious !" said Annie, musingly.

"Indeed!" And Jessie gave her a scrutinising look.

"He spoke so earnestly," pursued Annie, "and seemed so anxious to vindicate himself; but, of course, this could make no difference in my answer."

"No; because, you were uninterested about him. Wasn't it so?"

"Well, you heard what I said," returned Annie, banteringly, "and I can call you as a witness, if he ever affirms that I encouraged him."

"Be it so!" laughed Jessie, "and meanwhile, I have hit on a plan of putting him in the confessional, which may extract other secrets. But I shall need your co-operation and Lady Clara's, and I shall be left out of your little comedy if you refuse it."

"How could we refuse? On the contrary, we shall welcome whatever heightens his mystification: only—"

Annie suddenly stopped.

"*Only* what?" said Jessie.

"Well," resumed Annie, "I won't be mixed up with any love-making again, nor

will I assume any other part in the performance than I have done already."

"Why, you are taking another part now —you are proposing to play Miss Propriety," said Jessie.

"Well, I won't object to that character. Now, tell me what *you* are to play."

"I intend to be a clairvoyante. Lady Clara must give a *sèance*, and I will throw myself into a trance—you know I am an adept in spiritualism—and I will tell the fortune of everybody, including Mr. Harrifield, and you, too, if you like. What do you say to proposing it to Lady Clara?"

"I say it will be a great piece of fun," replied Annie, gleefully. "For I think spiritualism the funniest invention of the day. Let us go and tell her at once."

They went off, and their hostess entered into the scheme with avidity, as she did into anything that promised amusement. Uncertain who of her acquaintance were at Folkestone, she could not then decide what guests to invite, but she engaged to settle

this with Harrifield, when he came next day. She resolved to learn, at the same time, what he had said or done that Annie had suppressed, and what he really thought of Annie. Such a design seemed to require a private conference, and next morning she and Annie were together, when Harrifield was ushered in. A better manager would have waited for another meeting, but Lady Clara never restrained her impulses, and she had set her mind on instant discovery; so she fortunately thought of Annie's feigned deafness, which enabled her to draw out Harrifield in her presence, and thus, while furthering the project she had at heart, avenge herself for Annie's reserve.

Annie unconsciously strengthened these toils herself; for she was at the other end of the room when Harrifield entered, and thought it in character to remain there, which, assuming her to be deaf, gave more warrant for an aside between Lady Clara and their visitor. It is true, Harrifield went over to her, and made particular inquiries about her health, but he had no excuse for

saying more, and was obliged to take a seat by Lady Clara.

He thought Annie lovelier than ever. She sat in a light that converted her hair into sunshine, so bright did it look, and so beautiful; while the tints of her face, here rose colour, here softening into white, beamed through its veil of sentiment, and mirrored the animation of her eyes. Her posture, as she leant over some wool-work, showed the symmetry of her neck and bust, and those lines of grace were a spiritual music, eloquent to the sense, though silent to the ear. It was a music that enchanted Harrifield.

"I am glad you have come down here," remarked Lady Clara: "for you look wretched, and this place will do you good, if you can avoid being bored—your great weakness."

"There is no fear of my being bored, while you are here," replied Harrifield, "though you must allow me to observe that you are not very complimentary."

"That is, you want me to say you are looking well, when you look dreadful."

"Have I come to that?"

"Well, you have just the appearance of poor Mr. Boosey, who died of love, though the doctor said it was from drinking porter. But love is not likely to prove fatal with you, as it is your chronic condition."

"Yes, if I am to be thought smitten, whenever I show common civility to a pretty woman, but I have a different opinion, and I wish you wouldn't make such assertions. You have worn the thing to death, and it gets me a bad name."

Lady Clara laughed. "Then, you mustn't come to me for a character," she said, "and another thing I beg of you—don't throw such eyes at my companion."

"Hush!" murmured Harrifield. "Pray show some consideration for her feelings if you have none for mine."

"You forget she is deaf," rejoined Lady Clara, archly; "and as for your feelings, perhaps I ought to put her on her guard against them."

"I am sure you won't be so ill-natured, when you know very well she has nothing

to be guarded against. I shall really be annoyed, if you do, Clara."

Annie, too, felt that Lady Clara was treading dangerous ground, and sought her eye, to beseech forbearance; but she took care to avoid her glance. At the same time, Harrifield considered that he might lull Lady Clara's suspicions, by affecting indifference about Annie, who would thus be open to his approaches in future visits, since she could not, he supposed, hear what he said in her dispraise.

"Surely you needn't trouble yourself about what I say to Miss Staunton," pursued Lady Clara.

"Well, I don't fancy being vilified to anyone, particularly a lady," replied Harrifield.

"And more particularly a lady you wish to flirt with—your way of showing common civility. But I don't want you to run off with my companion."

"Run off with her indeed!"

"Nor her to run off with you."

"No fear of that, I am a heavy weight, and very hard to move."

"You owned the other day that you thought her a beauty."

"But she is deaf," said Harrifield, depreciatingly.

"That is rather an advantage just now."

"And she is, probably, stupid," continued Harrifield.

"What gives you that impression?"

"Why, her air, and the way she has been blushing there, though we are sitting apart, and not even speaking to her."

"But we have been speaking *about* her, and that always makes one's cheeks burn. As to her air, it is decidedly good, and you may find her more knowing than you expect."

Harrifield smiled. "She is not one to improve on acquaintance," he remarked, complacently.

He was prevented saying more by the entrance of a servant, who presented Lady Clara a card.

"Oh! the solicitor," she observed, glancing at the name. "Did you tell him Mr. Mullet was out yachting?"

"Yes, my lady," replied the servant, "and he requested to speak to you."

"I will come to him in the dining-room," said Lady Clara, and the servant disappeared.

Lady Clara had not succeeded in drawing Harrifield into any disclosure, but he had assumed a strain which pleased her as much, since it would both pique and amuse Annie. She felt that she could now leave the room without breaking their compact, yet she waited for Annie's concurrence.

"I must go and see Mr. Mullet's solicitor," she cried to her, in a loud voice, "but I shall be back in a moment."

Annie inclined her head, and Lady Clara departed.

Harrifield hastened to use the opportunity, which Annie decided should not be for his advantage.

"I have been longing to speak to you," he observed, in a raised voice, at the same time crossing to where Annie sat.

"I must really beg you not to bawl so," answered Annie, putting her hands to her ears: "your voice goes through me."

"I ask a thousand pardons," returned Harrifield, a little flustered. "I understood you that—in short, that you had some difficulty in hearing. Did you not tell me so yesterday?"

"I told you that I must be deaf to your speeches, Mr. Harrifield, but you mustn't suppose that I am deaf in reality."

Harrifield was paralysed.

"If I appear so, you must ascribe it to stupidity. *You know I am stupid.*"

"If you will allow me to—to explain—"

"I think you have been sufficiently explicit to Lady Clara. You have candidly expressed your present opinion of me, and, I assure you, *I am not one to improve on acquaintance.*"

"You are angry with me, and yet it was my love for you that prompted those words."

"Your love, sir!"

"Yes, I thought you would be secluded from me, if I showed my admiration of you—

admiration that would betray my attachment; and, therefore, I spoke as you heard. My real sentiments I had told you before."

"Your real sentiments are as likely to have been expressed in one case as the other: indeed, we may place more reliance in what is said of us to others than what is said to ourselves, and if there is deception at all, we know where it should be looked for."

"Now you mustn't set up for preacher, pretty Annie," smiled Harrifield, recovering his man-of-the-world ease; "first, because it doesn't suit your brilliant complexion; secondly, because you have been sinning yourself. Ah! that blush, though such a small one, tells the whole story. If I have used a little deception, you have done the same; and I have fallen, because you laid the snare. Now let us forgive and forget."

"I am willing to do both, on condition that you won't pay me any more compliments," replied Annie, turning away, though with an air that rather attracted than repelled.

"This is not forgiveness—it is condemnation," urged Harrifield. "You condemn me to silence, and that is the sternest sentence you can inflict. At least grant me this moment, and hear me now, if you never do again."

He caught her hand, as if to detain her, but was interrupted by the return of Lady Clara, who, to his further annoyance, was accompanied by Mr. Ravel. Lady Clara saw his movement towards Annie, but had too much tact to make any remark, and Annie retreated to the inner room, without looking round.

"I happened to mention your name, and find this gentleman is a friend of yours," she said: "so I have brought him up."

"Well, I am just going," answered Harrifield, suppressing his annoyance at being thus fastened upon by Ravel, and giving him a friendly nod.

"I have something for you to do first," rejoined Lady Clara: "I have picked up a clairvoyante, and I want you to tell me who is in Folkestone that I can invite to a séance."

"A capital idea!" replied Harrifield. "But there seems to be none of our set here, and the only people I have seen besides Ravel are some clients of his—unknowns named Mockright."

"Not unknown; for I know the name. Ah! I remember; it was an elderly gentleman I saw at Bramblecourt, and Mr. Mullet told me that papa had lent him a lot of money."

"Ah! Mullet is sure to have the right story," smiled Harrifield. "I can only say your papa couldn't lend money in a better quarter—eh, Ravel?"

"Mr. Mockright certainly bears a high name," said Ravel, cautiously.

"Then, we will invite him and his family," rejoined Lady Clara. "I will leave a card on them to-day."

"No, no! we shall find plenty without them," said Harrifield, hastily.

"I don't want many—only a few, and the Mockrights will do very well. As he is so high in papa's confidence, I should like to show his family some attention, and this is a good opportunity of doing it."

"Very well—as you like," answered Harrifield, unable to object further in the presence of Ravel. "Travers is coming down, and will be another: so you may consider your party made up."

"Not without Mr. Ravel, if we may have that pleasure," said Lady Clara, now in a condescending humour.

Ravel eagerly accepted the invitation, and he and Harrifield then departed together.

CHAPTER XX.

MOVING FORWARD.

All the way to the door Harrifield was cogitating how he could get rid of Ravel, and escape to more genial society. Fortunately they had hardly emerged from the house, when they met Travers.

"This is rather too much of a good thing," said the practical joker, as he responded to their greetings. "I want to speak to you, Ravel, about raising some money, and I want to arrange with you, Harrifield, about spending it; but what can I do with you both together?"

"It is a case of how happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away," replied Harrifield; "and as it is impossible

for Ravel to raise money for me, I shall vacate the field in your favour."

"Excuse me," smiled Ravel, "but I must keep you now I have found you, Mr. Harrifield. We have a very important matter to settle, while Mr. Travers's affair will be easily disposed of, and can stand over."

"And as my affair won't be easily settled, I am not inclined to meddle with it," remarked Harrifield: "so Travers and I will take a ramble, and call on you to-morrow."

"No, I won't deprive you of a sensation," said Travers. "Go with Ravel, and I have no doubt he will a tale unfold that will repay your trouble, if it pays nothing else. As for me, Ravel, I can promise you that we'll meet again at *fee*lippi."

Without waiting to see the effect of this sally, he turned away, and Harrifield was left in the clutches of Ravel.

The lawyer had been startled to find him in company with Annie, whom, in spite of her adroit retreat, he had recognised. A marriage between her and Harrifield would upset all his plans, which required their interests

to be in conflict—for that the match was sought by Mr. Blandford to cover some defect in the title to his estate, Ravel felt sure. He had laboured diligently to discover this defect, poring over genealogies and searching registers, but in vain, though he suspected that a clue existed in the mystery which connected Mr. Blandford with Jessie Balcombe. Hence he trusted to succeed in the end, and, meanwhile, it was necessary to keep Harrifield and the Blandfords apart. Yet here was Harrifield running into the very snare laid for his entanglement. Ravel did not know in what position Annie stood towards Lady Clara, being ignorant of her reconciliation with her father; but it was plain that she came in contact with Harrifield, and, aware of the power of "fancy," he dreaded the effect of her beauty on so ardent a temperament. Thus he determined to push the projected marriage with Jane Mockright while it might be done, and not rest till it was concluded.

A few steps brought them to the verge of the cliffs, where he stopped, and at once opened the subject.

"I haven't asked your decision about our conversation of the other morning," he said, "because you virtually intimated it by accepting Mr. Mockright's invitation to dinner; but the state of your affairs—"

"Oh! confound it, don't bring them up," interrupted Harrifield, as he struck a light for his cigar.

"But you must let me refer to the position you stand in."

"I really beg you won't. If you knew how disagreeable the subject is to me, you would never mention it in my presence."

"But, my dear Mr. Harrifield, you are absolutely beggared."

"Now do drop this theme," entreated Harrifield. "You see how I am worried by it, and yet you keep dinning it into my ears, as if it was a cheering piece of intelligence. Once for all, I don't wish to know anything about my affairs."

"Let me ask you if you have not come down here expressly to consult me about them."

"Certainly not. I came to you to take

them off my hands—to relieve me of all trouble about them: in short, I want you to pay the people, and give me a supply of money. I am ready to sign anything."

"Do you suppose that money is to be obtained by merely signing? If that could be done, nobody need ever be short. But unfortunately it can only be procured by *as*signing, and you know what will be your condition in this respect, after paying your present debts. There is nothing left to assign."

"What is the use of a lawyer if he can't get over such a difficulty? I believe it is in fact a difficulty of your own creation. But since we have again broached this subject, let us come to a clear understanding about it. I make over the management of my affairs entirely to you: do as you like, call for my signature whenever you please—only don't keep me without money."

"But this is the very point."

"Precisely. Now we understand each other, and I am glad we entered into it, and

have got it over. We can now go and look after Travers."

"I wish sincerely that nothing more was required," said Ravel, good-humouredly; "and I can even say that I shall ask nothing more, if you will authorise me to arrange for your marriage with Miss Mockright."

"There, you begin again, when I thought everything settled. I assure you, Ravel, this sort of thing bores me to death."

"You force me to observe that I offer you the choice between opulence and ruin," pursued Ravel, in a less pleasant tone. "Remember, I have no object in view but your interest, which I am bound to look after; and I tell you that this marriage is important to you, not only in respect to your present position, but as regards your succession to the Earldom. It will make the difference between a barren title and an endowed one."

"Well, don't press," pleaded Harrifield, rather brought up by this reasoning. "I told you I would think of it, and I will, but

I can't rush into everything at once. I must have time to consider."

Ravel thought it better to say no more, seeing that he had at least made an impression, and so they parted.

CHAPTER XXI.

ARABELLA GIVES CHASE.

Lady Clara drove to Mr. Mockright's, and left cards and an invitation, when she returned home, and took a promenade with Annie and her two children. They confined their stroll to the level plateau called "the leads," overlooking the Straits of Dover and the coast of France, and forming the noblest sea-walk in the world. It was now sprinkled with company, and some of the ladies dazzled by their beauty and some by their attire, while others excelled in both respects. In this throng Lady Clara learnt that she had no lack of acquaintance in Folkestone, though she met none with whom she was intimate, and she was, therefore, bound to no recog-

nition beyond smiles and bows. She soon tired of her ramble, and went home, leaving Annie with her children and their two attendants, and this party forsook the "leads" for the now solitary cliffs. Here Annie felt almost a child herself, under the exhilaration of the scene and the balmy freshness of the breeze. She chatted and laughed with her little companions, now showing them the yachts, now helping them to gather wild-flowers from the bank, loitering at one point, turning back at another, and enjoying all the freedom of the spot. After a time, she observed a small crag jutting from the face of the cliff, whence she might command a more extensive view. It was approached by a path in the slope, and, leaving the servants in charge above, she, with some difficulty, made her way down. From the ledge she looked up at the children and clapped her hands, but, in her glee, missed her footing, and might have fallen, if she had not been caught by a powerful hand. She turned round and beheld Alfred Mockright.

The surprise was mutual, and judging from their change of colour, caused pain to both. But Alfred instantly thought of putting Annie at her ease, and this feeling imparted composure alike to his look and manner.

"I must apologise for seizing you so roughly," he said, "but I saw you stumble, and there was no time for hesitation."

"No; I was making up my mind to a cut face, and perhaps the loss of my front teeth, when you so effectively interposed," replied Annie, with assumed gaiety.

But her voice trembled. Emotion appeared also in her face, in which the colour deepened, yet seemed to mirror the soft, timid light of her eyes, an effect transcending at the moment their brightest glance. Alfred saw a new phase of her beauty, but he was training himself to master his feelings, and talked on, adroitly changing the subject.

"I presume you ventured down here for the view," he said. "Certainly this is one

of the best points for seeing it, and the day is very favourable."

"Yes," replied Annie, with the same effort, "I never saw the French coast so plain."

"Nor I. The boatmen say it is a sign of rain, so I suppose we are coming to an end of our holiday weather."

"Ah! you believe in the boatmen?"

"Yes, as weather-prophets."

"And do you like boating here, as well as on the Thames?"

"I haven't tried it. In fact I don't intend to give so much time to boating in future. I have discovered there is something to be done in the world, besides rowing an eight-oar, and I want to work a little at my profession."

"You are giving up amusement for ambition!"

"I mustn't pretend to such a high motive," said Alfred, slightly colouring. "I don't aspire to a career—only to be employed. Enough of myself! you will agree that it is desirable for everybody to have a vocation."

"But so many have none," smiled Annie, "nor does there seem to be any room for them, so that the world loses nothing by their idleness."

"It certainly gets on without them, as it gets on without the money which people hoard in old stockings, but the world would be the better for so much talent or labour, just as it would be for the circulation of the hoarded money."

"That is true," said Annie, thoughtfully.

"There may be persons without much ability," continued Alfred, "persons who can't pretend to anything brilliant, who may yet do something by diligence, by practising business-habits, and by keeping before themselves the wish to be useful. There are others, again, who feel that a pursuit is a necessity, not for the money it brings in, but because they must work to be happy."

"And does this feeling ever seize indolent people, whose talents are apparent to every one, but who have no inclination for work? Or do their talents afford them a resource

against weariness, I wonder!" Annie was thinking of Charles Harrifield.

"That is a question beyond my grasp," answered Alfred. "I can only say that I know a man of great abilities, who devotes his life to pleasure, and who seems to find no satisfaction in it." Alfred, too, was thinking of Harrifield. "But this is prosy talk for a lady, and I am keeping you from friends," he added, hastily, as Annie, suddenly remembering her little companions above, glanced at the summit of the cliff, and kissed her hand to the children.

Alfred held out his hand, and it was in Annie's mind to thank him again, but she refrained, and they parted.

They had just been observed from below by Jane Mockright and Arabella, who were on the Sandgate Road, but, at that distance, they only recognised Alfred, Annie being metamorphosed by her fashionable attire, and, moreover, quite out of their thoughts.

"I wonder who that lady is with Alfred," remarked Jane, after a reconnaissance through her eye-glass.

"From their friendly parting, she must be an acquaintance of some standing," answered Arabella; "perhaps, somebody from Surbiton."

"That can't be; for I looked down the lists of visitors, in this morning's *Gazette*, and there was nobody we knew, except Mr. Harrifield."

"See, she has joined those servants and children," resumed Arabella, "and they are going into the field, where there are two ways they can walk, but if you go up this path, and I up that, we shall come in at each end of the field, and one of us may intercept her if we are quick."

"I certainly should like to find out who she is," rejoined Jane; "it will be such a crow over Alfred. Let us go."

And away they went. But it suddenly occurred to Arabella that it would be more profitable to intercept Alfred than the lady, about whom her curiosity began to wane, as she reverted to her first impression —that Alfred had met some old acquaintance by chance. So she took a more slanting

path, which reached the summit of the cliff further on, and thus was more likely to bring her up with Alfred. She was further favoured by his proceeding by the back of the Martello tower, instead of in front of it, which not only involved a round, but cut him off from the cliffs, so that she could advance upon him unobserved. Such was the thought which winged her feet to the summit, where she paused to recover breath, and scan the ground. Instantly she saw that Alfred had not gone the way she supposed. She felt depressed by the little disappointment; for her affections were growing more and more interested, and what she had begun as a scheme, now engaged her heart. But nothing would be gained by loitering, and since she had missed Alfred, she thought it better to walk along the cliffs till she met Jane. Her step had no impulse now, and she proceeded slowly, nursing her dejection. Her feelings, though neither deep nor sensitive, could be strongly moved; and if their fervour soon subsided, it was not so much from their want of stability, as from her

submission to circumstances. These were at moments discouraging, but, on the whole, rather urged her on, and hence the failure of one manœuvre led her to devise another.

As she was considering what to do next, she suddenly descried Alfred in her front. He reached the spot above the jutting crag, stood a moment, and then descended to the ledge, by the same path which had been followed by Annie. The incident struck Arabella as of no good import, and she regretted that she had not carried out the design of intercepting the lady, and thus ascertaining who she was. Vainly did she tax conjecture on this point. Once she thought of Annie. Had Annie followed Alfred to Folkestone to renew her wiles? That would be too bold a stroke, and, besides, according to her mother's information, they had quarrelled. Furthermore, Arabella flattered herself that she knew all Annie's dresses, and the lady's costume bore no resemblance to Annie's.

Meanwhile, Alfred stood on the ledge, apparently with no object; for he faced the

cliff with his eyes on the ground. Eventually he glanced up, and perceived Arabella.

"Are you looking for fossils?" asked Arabella, with a smile; she decided not to allude to the lady, as it might give Alfred the impression—whispered by her own conscience—that she was always watching him.

"For something as shadowy," answered Alfred. "I was recalling memories." As he spoke, he strode up the slope to her side.

"Now, what if I were to put you under cross-examination," pursued Arabella, "and required you to say what memories you were in quest of, and why you chose that particular spot for the operation?"

"I should reply that it would be useless to tell you, because my feelings could only be understood by one who has gone through the same experiences."

"And how do you know I have not?" asked Arabella, in a tone expressing sadness.

"I hope not," replied Alfred.

"Then they have made you unhappy?"

"Well, they have been a discipline for me, and discipline is always painful, though the ultimate effect may be salutary."

"If you perceive this, the impression must be slight, and I don't wonder at your calling your memories shadowy; for they must be all but effaced."

"When I called them shadowy, I didn't mean they had faded. You spoke of fossils, which are shadowy to the eye, though graven on rock, and I adopted your idea. Now you see—do you not?—how impossible it is for you to understand my feelings."

"I understand this much—that you have had some disappointment," said Arabella: "and you think this is out of my experience." She sighed, and looked away, but presently turned a soft glance on Alfred. "Men may speak of these things, you know: they may have their confidant, or tell the whole world, if they like; but g*u*rls must suffer in silence! Who can guess what they suffer? A g*u*rl may love, but she is not only forbid to avow it—she mustn't even show it, while you men have the privilege of declaring your

love to its object: you say, that I can't understand your feelings; I both understand and admire them; what I can't understand is that there should be a *g*url in existence too silly to appreciate you. Would I care for such a dolt if I were a man—a man like you! No! I would have a wife who adored the ground I trod upon."

Arabella drew breath after this speech, a little doubting whether she had gone too far, but presently concluding that she had not. In fact, Alfred did not perceive the overture, having become used to Arabella's attentions, and begun to regard her almost as one of the family. And humbled as he was at his rejection by Annie, he appreciated the sympathy of a handsome girl, who overlooked his deficiencies; and Arabella saw that her remarks told. We can forgive much under the influence of a liking, or in the way of set-off; and Alfred, alive to short-comings in himself, looked indulgently on the cockneyisms of Arabella. She might want a little polishing, he thought, but, after all, she was a clever girl, and had

a good heart at bottom; and he began to think heart ought to count for more in the world than it did.

A rejected lover is usually incensed against the whole sex, as well as his cruel mistress, but Alfred was not betrayed into such extravagance. In his first anguish, indeed, he felt bitterness towards Annie, but, as we have seen, he soon repressed this feeling, and ascribed his failure to his own shortcomings. Annie's demeanour had led him in this course from their first acquaintance, and thus made the conclusion natural, if not inevitable. At the same time, his repulse caused woman to rise in his estimation, instead of falling, because Annie, in a position of dependence, showed herself proof to the temptation of wealth, and he not only noted her sensibility and delicacy, but caught from her something of these qualities himself. So he was prepared to be touched by Arabella's argument, which he considered as urged solely for her sex; and he acknowledged that woman stood at a greater disadvantage in love than man, for-

getting how amply she can show a preference, and that speaking by her eyes, her silence affords her a means both of approach and retreat.

Arabella had no time to reply to his observations; for they were now joined by Jane, who, after walking through the field, came on in quest of her friend, wondering why she lingered. The reason seemed too plain when Arabella appeared in the company of Alfred, and Jane made no secret of her displeasure.

"This is what you call coming to meet me," she said to Arabella. "I really was never treated so rudely before."

"I happened to meet Mr. Alfred," replied Arabella, apologetically, and turning very red.

"You happened to meet!" echoed Jane. And she gave a short laugh. "I am surprised Alfred can be so stupid."

"My stupidity ought not to surprise anybody, though how it is signalised in the present instance I don't see," said Alfred, good-humouredly.

"If *you* don't see, everybody else does," returned Jane, with a glance at Arabella. "But I will thank you to take me home now. I, at least, mustn't stroll about alone, though it may suit other people to do so; and they may fancy no one perceives their motives."

Arabella could not misunderstand this innuendo, and she caught the opening for pretending indifference about Alfred, with the view of disarming Jane's suspicions.

"We needn't take Mr. Alfred, dear," she suggested. "It will be quite enough for us to be together, you know."

"You will allow me to know what is proper, without being instructed by you, Miss Chowler," answered Jane, with the dignity of a Countess.

"I didn't mean *that*, I assure you, dear," rejoined Arabella, meekly.

"You made a very sensible suggestion, which I shall leave you to carry out, if you please," smiled Alfred; "and I hope Jane will get out of her tantrum as you go along."

With these words, he turned away, leaving Jane to digest his rebuke. But she chose rather to avenge it on Arabella.

"You may stir up my brother to affront me," she said, "but you will find it easier to do that, than to effect your other designs."

"How can you accuse me of such baseness, dear Jane," pleaded Arabella, deprecatingly, "such wickedness, as it would be in me, to whom you have been so kind! Why should I stir up your brother against you—you, whom I so admire, so love, and to whom I owe so much gratitude? It isn't like you to say this—it isn't indeed! And what can you mean by accusing me of *other designs?*"

"You know very well what I mean."

"I am sorry you should say so, dear."

"If the cap fits, you may wear it," returned Jane, though in a mollified tone. "I only warn you that such designs are ridiculous in the highest degree, and will end in failure. A likely thing indeed!"

"You are very cruel to me to-day," whimpered Arabella. "But I know your heart,

and a day may come when you will wish, even amidst the glitter of a court, and when you are receiving the homage of the great, that you had near you such a faithful friend as Arabella Chowler—though I know you won't think of me *then*."

This handsome discount of the future, though involving a contradiction, still further softened Jane, who was also touched by Arabella's tears. She made a conciliatory remark; Arabella responded; and by the time they reached home, they had not only got over their quarrel, but had again become violent friends.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE INVITATION.

Lady Clara's cards and invitation imparted an electric shock to the Mockrights. Mrs. Mockright jumped off her chair, when she opened the invitation; Mr. Mockright read it three times, once with his naked eyes, and twice through his spectacles; and Ada took three steps at a stride, in her haste to meet Jane and Arabella in the hall, and report the intelligence. Jane pretended to receive it with composure, but betrayed her gratification in her eyes and glowing cheeks; while Arabella flew into raptures, though, in reality, disconcerted at this new exultation of her friends. All regarded the invitation as a step in Harrifield's ad-

dresses to Jane, and intended to mark the approval of the Bramblecourt family. This view increased the devotedness of Arabella, who yearned to be of the party, and won to her interest both Jane and her mother, but a doubt arose whether the form of invitation sanctioned such a proceeding. In vain the ladies referred to *Hints on Etiquette:* that invaluable work, though containing a chapter on invitations, threw no light on this difficulty, nor on any other indeed; and it became necessary to submit the point to Mr. Mockright. But who would undertake the office? The invitation had so raised Mr. Mockright in the stirrups, that he was more awful than ever, and even Jane shrank from a measure which, touching him on the withers, might bring down upon her a vial of wrath. At last, she resolved to put the task on Alfred: he willingly undertook it, and seized the opportunity of being alone with his father to broach the subject.

"Do you think we ought to take Miss Chowler with us to-morrow night?" he asked. "Lady Clara would no doubt have

invited her, if she had known of her being on a visit to us."

Mr. Mockright regarded his son with an apoplectic stare.

"That is your opinion?" he said, at length.

"Decidedly; and in our own circle, we should, of course, arrange for her going wherever we went ourselves."

Mr. Mockright now opened his mouth. It is a curious fact that snobs derive their worst traits from the gentler sex: it is woman, our monitress in so much that is good, who raises barriers to social intercourse, and leads us to elevate molehills of grade, or often simply of means, into mountains. The enlarged education of the future may raise her above such littleness, and make her influence in society one of conciliation, instead of division. But, however this may be, it is certain that Mr. Mockright did not regard Alfred's question with the horror which the ladies of his family anticipated. In fact, his pride was different from theirs, being strictly purse-pride. No doubt, he looked down upon his neighbours

at Surbiton, but it was because their best man fell short of two thousand a-year, while he rolled in money. Moreover, he was capable of good-nature to the humblest, and he now reflected that he had taken up Arabella—at least, his family had, and that he was, therefore, bound to see that she received every consideration.

"I sent you to Cambridge," he resumed, after this pause; "what did you learn there?"

"Not too much, I am sorry to say," replied Alfred, remembering his lost opportunities, and almost tempted to say that he had "learnt to row."

"You were among gentlemen, and ought to have learnt enough to tell you what to do in a case like this," rejoined his father, sternly.

"This is rather a point for a lady, but I think when my mother answers the invitation, there could be no harm in your writing to Lady Clara, as she knows you personally, and asking leave to bring our visitor with us."

"That is a sensible course, and so is pro-

bably the proper one," observed Mr. Mockright, approvingly. "We must do what is proper here, because it isn't a matter of money, to be settled how you like, by paying a poun' or two more. It is a thing that shows what you are made of; and, in going among the nobility, we have to be careful that we ain't booked for a set of danged radicals."

Mr. Mockright finished this speech with a sort of growl, as he suddenly remembered that the Earl of Bramblecourt himself was a radical, and hence disqualified his family from using the term in reproach.

Nevertheless, he wrote the note to Lady Clara, and before the day expired, received an answer, duly inviting Arabella. Nothing now seemed wanting to the triumph of the ladies of his family. But human felicity has always an alloy, and their success brought a revulsion of feeling. The prospect of appearing in a high circle, rendered them all very nervous. In fact they had aspired to what, as it drew near, seemed a terror, and Mrs. Mockright broke down, declaring that

she must send an excuse, as she could not possibly go. But this arrangement Jane vehemently opposed. She and Ada and Arabella were content to endure the misery of the treat for the sake of the *éclât;* and she insisted on the same effort from her mother, who, according to *Hints on Etiquette*, must be their chaperon. Mrs. Mockright finally yielded, but with a faltering heart, insomuch that the announcement of the carriage made her teeth chatter, and she was only steadied by a glass of brandy-and-water. Then the girls supported her to the hall, as if they were attending a funeral. The carriage whirled off, and she suddenly found herself in the flare of Lady Clara's drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CLAIRVOYANCE.

Mr. Mullet had returned from his excursion, together with his two companions, Colonel Dashwood, the guardsman, and Mr. Ashley de Jonnes, the member; and they were all in the drawing-room on the arrival of the Mockrights. There also were Harrifield and his friend Travers, with Ravel, and Lady Clara, and Annie. The last gave all her attention to the guardsman, who was rehearsing to her how the yacht nearly came to grief, owing to their having mistaken Dungeness light for Calais.

"But how could you be so careless?" said Annie. "Really, I shall be afraid to take

a sail with you, if you can be misled in that way."

"Very naturally," replied the guardsman. "But you mustn't put me down among the disqualified. The blame lies between the sailing master and Mullet. According to Mullet's account, he asked what course we were on, when the master answered north-east, and Mullet went to the wheel, and found we were going *south*-east, so he ordered the ship to be pointed northerly. But the master swears that he told him, not north, but south-east, which we were certainly laid for at the time, and if he did say south, of course it was Mullet got us into the mess."

"I got you into no mess," cried Mullet, coming up as the words were spoken; "it was that blundering skipper."

"Now, Mr. Mullet, shall I tell you what I think?" said Annie.

"Well?" smiled Mullet.

"Well, my candid opinion is that the blunder was yours."

"Ha! ha! roars of laughter!" exclaimed

Mullet. "You are a true woman—jumping to a conclusion, without knowing the facts. Now I could prove, on the clearest evidence, that I had no more to do with it than you had yourself. But what is the use? You would be of the same opinion still, and if I asked your reason, you would have none to give. But here is Travers, who shall decide whether the fault lay with me or not. You have heard—"

"Yes, all about it," said Travers; "twice from you, and three times each from Dashwood and De Jonnes. Pray don't tell me again."

"Let me state my case," urged Mullet.

"I had rather be put to death at once," answered Travers. "Besides, you *have* no case. You nearly run the yacht on the rocks, and I believe Dashwood and De Jonnes were as deep in it as you were. You all wanted a sensation."

The guardsman met this charge with an amused smile, but it drew forth a protest from Mr. Mullet, who declared Travers to be as unpractical as a woman.

"That is what you are always saying about us," cried Annie. "Now do stand up for us, Mr. Travers, and prove we are not unpractical; for though I don't know exactly what it means, I am sure it is something bad. Ah, you may laugh, Mr. Mullet, but we will take our revenge some day."

The entry of the Mockrights created a diversion for Mullet, enabling him to effect an orderly retreat, but, having his mind preoccupied, he ran into another difficulty, by addressing Mr. Mockright as Mr. Mockery.

Harrifield had been detained till this moment by Lady Clara, and now thought to make a dash at Annie, but found the way blocked by the Mockrights. He was obliged, therefore, to take note of their presence, and he did this with so much grace as to restore consciousness to Mrs. Mockright, who, at first, hardly knew whether she stood on her head or her heels.

"I am glad to see you looking so well, Mr. Harrifield," she mustered courage to say.

"Thank you. The air of this place agrees with me, I think."

"You are certainly looking uncommonly well," resumed Mrs. Mockright, pursuing a topic which had been so successful.

"I am remarkably well, thank you."

Mrs. Mockright felt that she must say something more, and probed her mind for an idea, but none appeared; so after what appeared to her a fearful pause, though it was only a breath or two, she reverted to her first theme.

"Yes, you look very well indeed," she said. "I am sure, Jane, you must be delighted to see Mr. Harrifield looking so well."

This reference flurried Jane, prompting a little blush, partly of vexation at her mother's stupidity, yet not without a touch of sentiment. Meanwhile, Mr Mullet presented Ada to Travers as Miss Chowler, and then introduced Alfred to his own father. Mr. Mockright was about to explain, but, before he could speak, he was accosted by Lady Clara, who drew him into a conversation. Tea was handed round, and now Alfred perceived Annie, and instantly crossed over to her.

"I forgot to tell you this morning that I was staying with Lady Clara," said Annie, with glowing cheek, as they shook hands.

"I can hardly regret that, since it has led to my being so agreeably surprised," replied Alfred, gallantly. "Do you intend to make a long stay in Folkestone?"

"Only another week, I think."

"Exactly our time; and it will soon fly if we are to have such entertainments as Lady Clara has provided for us this evening. Pray who is the clairvoyante?"

Annie smiled. "My lips are sealed on that point," she said.

"What, is there a secret?" exclaimed Alfred.

"Of course. It is impossible to have clairvoyance without secrets, not to mention spiritualism, and I understand the performance will be a medley of both."

"I see you are an unbeliever, however," rejoined Alfred. "And now I remember that you had no faith in the gipsy on Esher Common."

"Ah! but you mustn't judge me by that.

We shall have a real sybil to-night, and I don't know but I may be persuaded to have my fortune told in respectable company."

"Will the sybil confine herself to telling fortunes, then?"

"By no means. We may ask her any question within the range of human knowledge, or beyond it, for that matter: and we shall receive such answer as we may get."

"That is very satisfactory," replied Alfred; "and ought to be a credential to everybody."

Annie had by this time come under the eye of Arabella, who whispered her discovery to Jane.

"The cat is out now," she continued. "We needn't puzzle any more about the lady we saw with Alfred this morning." And Arabella bit her lip with vexation.

"To think of our meeting her here, of all places in the world!" exclaimed Jane.

"She is so sly—so deep," rejoined Arabella, almost crying. "I am sure she came down to Folkestone after Alfred, and to see him so infatuated—it is really melancholy."

But Alfred did not seem infatuated; for

Annie being now joined by the guardsman and De Jonnes, he seized a favourable moment to move away; while Annie, on her part, complacently chatted with the new comers. Presently she espied Mrs. Mockright, and left the two gentlemen to take a seat by her side.

Mrs. Mockright had been deserted by everybody, and was feeling very awkward, yet struggling for her ordinary majesty of aspect, when thus invaded. Hence she took the attention kindly, and though doubtful as to Annie's position with Lady Clara, had sufficient acuteness to see that she exercised an attraction over the male portion of the company, while appearing perfectly at home herself. She concluded, therefore, that she would rather be exalted than compromised by Annie's companionship; and under this encouragement began to feel composed.

Nor was the incident unappreciated by her husband and son. Alfred had torn himself away from Annie, remembering that he must now meet her only as a friend, and only when a meeting could not be avoided, but his eye

followed her movements, and he felt a thrill of pleasure as he saw her sit down by his mother. Mr. Mockright, from different motives, viewed the act of attention with almost equal gratification. It recognized Mrs. Mockright's importance—consequently, his own; it showed attachment to his family, and, lastly, it looked as if Annie recollected his little kindnesses to her. Such conduct called for some recognition; it seemed to require that he, Mr. Mockright, should come out before all the company, and take Annie by the hand; and this he accordingly did.

"How do you do, ma'am?" he exclaimed, in a tone that attracted every eye, at the same time giving her hand a hearty wring, "I am very glad to see you."

The salutation met a cordial response, and it was evident that Annie liked Mr. Mockright, in spite of his snobbism. That he and his wife should monopolise the belle of the room was, however, not to be borne, and after a reasonable interval, Lady Clara executed a manœuvre which made way for Harrifield. At the same moment, Mr.

Mockright was attacked by Ashley de Jonnes.

"By the way, Mr. Mockright, how is it you city magnates keep the stocks so low?" said the Member. "After every allowance for the late earthquakes, swallowing up such concerns as the Chatham and Dover, Gurneys, and the Agra, surely there ought by this time to have been a rebound?"

"Very likely, sir," replied Mr. Mockright, "but we don't consider what ought to be, but what is."

"But the logic of facts," urged De Jonnes.

"I don't understand it, sir. The thing we look at is figures—in short, a man's balance at his banker's, or what he is good for, and the same with a company."

"Now you have hit it. You establish an arbitrary test, which puts a stop to enterprise, and then you complain that there is a general panic."

"I don't complain, sir. What is the panic to me?"

"Well, you support this false medium, which is the bottom of it."

"You are mistaken, sir. I go dead against all false mediums, and say we should have nothing afloat but money or money's worth."

"That is the very thing. You tie up trade, when it should be free as the winds. You lock up the money in the bank cellars, in order that there may be five pounds for every five pound note. Why shouldn't there be five pound notes to represent five pounds without keeping exactly that sum under lock and key? Then there would be no failures, because everybody could get as much money, or rather as many bank-notes, as they pleased."

"And a time would come when everybody would find their five-pound notes were like the Chatham and Dover debentures, sir, without anything to stand upon."

"They would stand upon credit."

"You don't know what you are talking about, sir. Credit may be built up as high as the Monument, but it won't do to stand on. You must stand on solid cash, or, some day or other, you will be carried off your legs—and serve you danged right, too!"

While Mr. Mockright was thus entangled in the currency question, Harrifield glided into mazes as wild on a lighter topic. He had come to the gathering determined to resist his predilection for Annie. This resolution was forced upon him by Ravel's lecture, which though it did not altogether bring him to realise his position, convinced him that the marriage with Jane Mockright offered the best escape from his difficulties. The decision cost him a struggle, for Annie was more in his thoughts than he knew, and he continually dwelt on her graces, as they pictured themselves to his imagination. But the occasion was favourable for resisting the spell. He imagined that Annie would appear only in a corner of the room, on sufferance, and, therefore, that he might almost be blind to her presence. Nor can it be denied that this consideration made the effort seem easier on another ground; for it lowered Annie before the world, and, governed by the world's views, he shrank from that association with her in public, which enchanted him in private. But the

result had not accorded with his expectations. To his surprise, she was not thrust in the background, but appeared on an equality with Lady Clara, who treated her with the greatest kindness and allowed her to become a centre of attraction. Instantly his resolution evaporated; he forgot both Ravel's arguments and the critical state of his affairs, and would have devoted himself to Annie, only that he was held fast by Lady Clara. She, not wise in ordinary things, had yet a woman's perception of character, and a woman's knowledge of the paths to matrimony. She knew that Harrifield was credited with great successes—that hearts fell before his handsome face and the fascination of his manners; and she conceived that he would never be stirred to a real attachment where all ran smooth. Hence she tantalised him with Annie—one moment placing her in his way, and then raising between them what seemed impassable barriers. But the time had now come when he must learn Annie's real position; she saw that an impression had been made; and, after a last coquetting,

she effected a dexterous flank movement, introduced Annie by her proper name, and left events to their course.

"I seem to be on enchanted ground to-night," Harrifield said to Annie, with a smile. "Mullet has just introduced Miss Chowler to me as Mrs. Mockery, and now Lady Clara introduces Miss Staunton as Miss Blandford. Either she has caught Mullet's disease of the brain, or I am in a dream, and in that case, I shall be much obliged to Miss Blandford or Miss Staunton not to wake me."

"Do you think Mr. Harrifield could be awoke from his dream by either Miss Staunton or Miss Blandford, or indeed by anybody?" smiled Annie in answer.

A shade appeared on Harrifield's face, recognising the latent meaning of her words; but it vanished directly, and left his usual look.

"Yes, if anybody could tell me both the dream and the interpretation thereof," he replied.

"Ah! that is a problem for the clairvoyante," rejoined Annie. "It will be an

admirable test of her powers, too, and you can tell us whether she answers to the purpose."

"Then, am I the only dreamer of dreams, that this task should devolve on me? I thought dreaming was a quality pertaining chiefly to the gentler sex, and that I no more sinned than at least any ordinary young lady—say, for instance, Miss Chowler or Miss Mockright."

"Or Miss Staunton, perhaps," said Annie, archly.

"No; for she isn't an ordinary, but an extraordinary young lady—so much so, that I don't even know whether she exists. I believe I am talking to Miss Blandford now—am I not?"

"I must remind you of the old saw—ask no questions, and you will be told no stories."

"But I should like to be told a story!"

"What about, pray?"

"Well, about Miss Staunton."

"I thought you didn't realise her existence."

"In truth, I hardly can. She was so

exquisite—so above what I conceived possible in woman, that I could believe her to have been a magical illusion. Ah! Miss Blandford, I may tell you what I could not say to her, but if I but half-described her attractions, you would think me romancing, unless—"

"Unless I were *deaf*," suggested Annie.

"Unless we stood before that mirror there," pursued Harrifield, "and then I could confirm my words by showing you her portrait."

"I am afraid I couldn't see it by this light."

"Now you have made me notice how dim the room is, which, sitting by you, I naturally didn't observe before, though the chandelier is certainly going out. But what matter when there are such bright eyes here?"

Almost as he spoke the room was left nearly in darkness, only the figures of the company being visible.

"This is a sensation," remarked Travers, joining Harrifield and Annie.

"I hope you have no hand in it," answered Harrifield, quickly.

All this time, Mr. Ravel, though known to the whole company, was left unnoticed, except by a passing salutation; and stood brooding over the slight, with his back to the drapery which masked the folding doors of the inner room. But now a hand passed out, seized his arm, and, covered by the obscurity, drew him unnoticed behind the curtain. The next moment he found himself in the presence of a lady, whom a shaded lamp enabled him to recognise.

"Miss Balcombe!" he exclaimed, in pleased surprise.

"Yes, I am to be the clairvoyante to-night," answered Jessie; "and, you know, clairvoyantes require a confederate: so I now claim the good offices you tendered to me the other day."

"But you claim them in a business where they can be of no avail," smiled Ravel.

"Let us try," said Jessie, who had incidentally learnt from Lady Clara that Ravel was Harrifield's solicitor. "To-night I must

answer questions put to me by Mr. Harrifield: now I know nothing of his position, while you, as his solicitor, know everything about him. Just tell me enough of his present situation to enable me to play the oracle."

"You ask me for professional secrets," urged Ravel, hesitating.

"Did you not lately ask *me* for secrets?" returned Jessie. "But this is not a time for debates, as all must be done in a moment. Will you trust me or not?"

"I *will*, unreservedly. In a word, then, he is on the brink of ruin, but a way of escape is open to him by a wealthy marriage."

"Marriage!" echoed Jessie, breathless. "With whom?"

"With Miss Mockright. He has but to speak, and it will be arranged."

"And what does he say?"

"He wavers."

"Ah!"

"If you could urge it on by some foreshadowing," continued Ravel, suddenly inspired, "it might exercise an influence, in

his present mood. But you must be cautious."

"Rely on my discretion," answered Jessie.

"I do. And now I will tell you something he doesn't know himself, and which will exalt your prescience still more." And Ravel added a few words in a low voice.

"You haven't told him this?" said Jessie.

"Not till to-morrow. I heard it only as I came in."

"I know enough now," rejoined Jessie; "and must begin my show. Adieu, and thank you."

She gave him her hand, on which, emboldened by what had passed, he ventured a slight pressure, and he thought Jessie did not look displeased, as he slipped back into the drawing-room.

He found the company still in eclipse, and in a state of expectation, which presently was heightened by a strain of music, stealing in plaintive notes through the room. Then a voice accompanied the melody by these words:—

"Spirits and ministries round us floating—
Never appearing, never perceived,
'Neath your mantle invisible noting
All the deep secrets hearts have conceived:
Whisper us now, our darkness enlighten.
With the foretokens of things to be,
Shadows and mysteries solve and brighten
Under the spell of your witchery!

"When our worn body is sunk in slumber,
And its perceptions are subtly refin'd,
When the gross senses no longer encumber
All the emotions and flights of the mind:
Then to our thoughts, in accents unspoken,
Past, present, and future duly reveal;
Nor, in in the record of presages broken,
Aught of our fortune or fate conceal."

The voice was sweet and thrilled with feeling, which found an echo in the music, and the concealment of the performers heightened the effect of both. As the sounds died away, the company broke into a murmur of applause, and, at the same moment, the apartment became partially re-lit. It was then seen that invisible hands had opened the folding-doors, which gave access to the inner room, where only enough light pene-

trated to show a semicircle of seats, ranged round an alcove at the further end. Suddenly the curtains of the alcove flew apart, when there appeared within a veiled woman, seated on a tripod, and motionless as a statue.

"This is admirable," observed Harrifield to Annie. "You must tell us who contrived it."

"The clairvoyante made all the arrangements herself," answered Annie.

"She is an artist, then," rejoined Harrifield.

"Now I begin to hope that you will discover her to be a prophetess by-and-bye."

The conversation was interrupted by Lady Clara, who requested her guests to sit down in the semicircle, the ladies on the right, and the gentlemen on the left.

"What an arbitrary arrangement," remarked Harrifield. "Why can't we sit as we like?"

"Because," answered Lady Clara, "it would break the—the—what is it, Annie?"

"The magnetic chain," said Annie, passing to her assigned place.

But she was scarcely seated when Lady Clara asked her to move up further, and this brought her into the centre, where, become the connecting link with the gentlemen, she found herself between Jane Mockright and Alfred. Jane had been disquieted by the attention bestowed on her from Harrifield, but it had not been so marked as to render her jealous; for Harrifield had, after all, talked longer with herself. Then she was impressed by Annie's intimacy with Lady Clara; so she decided to be friendly. Annie might prove a support in her future relations with the noble family of Bramble-court.

But the moment afforded no opportunity for more than a civil word; for presently they were attracted by a shower of pieces of paper, of which everybody tried to secure one. Most of the scraps were blank, but some were inscribed with a name, and, as soon as this transpired, the company became curious to know the reason.

"Perhaps, I ought to explain," cried Mr. Mullet, prompted by Lady Clara; "those

whose names are *not* inscribed are cited to question the clairvoyante, and—"

"No, no!" struck in Lady Clara.

"Why, that is what you have just told me," said Mr. Mullet. "I appeal to you to say, Charles Harrifield."

"I would rather Lady Clara spoke for herself," answered the polite Harrifield.

"Then it is this," said Lady Clara. "Those whose names are inscribed are—what is it, Annie?"

"Mediums," Annie replied.

"Yes;" continued Lady Clara; "and they are to question the clairvoyante by turns, holding her hand while they speak. The rest of us may do as we like."

"I know you have got it wrong," observed Mullet. "But women are sure to blunder."

"Oh, Mr. Mullet!" said Annie, shaking her head.

But the remark attracted no other notice, attention being concentrated on the inscribed slips, which were now collected, and found to be only four in number. These respec-

tively bore the names of Harrifield, Miss Mockright, Alfred, and Ashley de Jonnes, the last chosen for no merit of his own, but to prevent any suspicion of design in the selection of the others. De Jonnes, however, saw in the incident a recognition of his senatorial rank, which he thought, entitled him also to precedence in audience; so he asked Lady Clara if he should present himself first.

"Pray do," she replied. "It will encourage Miss Mockright, who is too shy to lead off."

There was a general hush as De Jonnes approached the alcove, and all bent their ears to listen, but the moment he took the clairvoyante's hand, the room was again invaded by a strain of music, which prevented their being overheard.

"Shall I be successful in my ambition?" asked De Jonnes.

"Perfectly," replied the clairvoyante.

"As an orator or an administrator?"

"As an administrator."

"In what office?"

"As Secretary of State!"

"That is great success, indeed. But there are four Secretaries of State. Which department shall I be intrusted with?"

"The Jog Department."

"You are not sufficiently specific, as they are all jog departments."

But the oracle would say no more, and her silence being seconded by the cessation of the music, De Jonnes took the hint, and returned to the circle of spectators. Here he was asked his opinion of the clairvoyante by several voices at once.

"She is simply wonderful," replied the M.P., impressively.

"Most wonderful, if De Jonnes reaches the height she has foretold," cried the Guardsman.

"Now, tell us, candidly, De Jonnes, hasn't she declared you shall be Prime Minister?" asked Travers.

"She has *primed* him somehow, it is clear," observed Harrifield.

While this was passing, Lady Clara invited Jane to present herself, but the young

lady still hung back, though promising to go up after Alfred. It was Alfred, therefore, who now responded to the summons of the music.

"Do you know me?" he asked, as he took the clairvoyante's hand.

"Yes. I know you by an affinity in my heart. We have both suffered in our affections—you, submissively; I resisting."

"And which is the better course?"

"That will appear by the event."

"Was it to tell me this you cited me here?"

"I cited you under attraction, which indicates that our fates are at some point threatened by the same danger. How I shall be urged to it I know not. You, I would caution against aspiring too high, either directly, or through others."

She felt a little movement in Alfred's hand, and thought she had touched a chord; but, however this might be, she misinterpreted its import. He was not thinking of the subject uppermost in her own mind, the marriage of his sister with Harrifield, and

consequent connection of his family with the aristocracy; and, therefore, she failed in her aim of setting him against that project. Indeed, she alluded to it too remotely to call it to his remembrance; for she was under an impression that his strong judgment would reject her supernatural pretensions in what she said, and rather suspect her of a design; and, after all, he could exercise but a secondary influence in the matter. She could speak more pointedly to Jane, one of her own sex, hence more susceptible of superstitious impressions; and she felt a thrill of expectancy, as Lady Clara brought her forward. True, the incident excited also other feelings in her breast—envy, jealousy, and spite; envy of Jane's wealth, jealousy of the position in which she stood towards Harrifield, and the spite of an unhappy rival. But her habit of self-command enabled her to suppress not only any manifestation of this mental agitation, but almost the agitation itself.

Jane, meanwhile, now that she had crossed the rubicon of the circle, and stood alone

before the clairvoyante, assumed her ordinary arrogance; for it was only amongst people of fashion that she felt embarrassed: and, though under some impression of supernatural powers, she regarded the clairvoyante as one who could be hired for money —consequently as an inferior.

"What am I to say?" she said, hardly deigning to take Jessie's hand.

"Have you so few thoughts?" answered the clairvoyante, with a touch of sarcasm. "Well, speak of what was in your mind when you entered the room!"

"How am I to remember?"

"By the blush on your cheek."

"How do you know I am blushing, or why I should? You are only guessing."

"Enough! But I recommend you to beware of the letter H."

The admonition threw Jane in a flutter. "For what reason?" she demanded.

"Because your fate is in antagonism to it, and when it doesn't bring you disappointment, it will involve you in misery."

"But there are things in the world that

compensate for disappointment and misery —at least, reconcile us to them."

"Those things will never be yours, except in connexion with happiness."

"They can never come to me but by marriage, and how am I to be happy unless I am married."

"I see before you two prospects of marriage—one with a person you have seen, which is dark and lowering, but may end in nothing; the other with a person you have yet to see, and who, if you choose wisely, will be your husband."

"I don't believe a word you say," returned Jane, almost crying with vexation. "It is all guess-work."

She flung down the clairvoyante's hand, and went off to her seat, her shyness overborne by her anger, which, however, the obscurity screened from observation.

Different were the feelings of the clairvoyante, now awaiting the approach of Harrifield. This was the moment of which she had dreamt, for which she had plotted, and which might be the hinge of her future

life, and it aroused the deepest instincts of her nature. She was moved equally, and at the same instant, by love, hope, and misgiving, by tender memories, and present apprehensions. Mercenary as she might be by habit, in this case she admitted no sordid consideration, and was uninfluenced by ambition. She thought of Harrifield as himself alone, without reference to his position, and with no remembrance but what rose from her passion, and linked their destiny. Her love for him was still the love of her girlhood—fervent, romantic, and devoted, ready to give up for him everything on earth. Seven years had passed since they parted, yet he had never been absent from her thoughts, not even when she conceived a future from which he must be excluded. Anything that pointed to him still had power to turn her aside, and, in this pursuit, she either ran wild with hope, or was plunged in distraction. And now she was to speak to him, without revealing herself, and in a character that might enable her to influence

his course; she was to give him her hand, the hand he once vowed to keep for ever; and for the moment she bent under the strain.

Does our nature indeed possess a mystic quality, susceptible of affinities?—something akin to what jugglers sham, and which may really be called magnetism! Certainly, the demeanour of Harrifield afforded ground for such a presumption; for he wore a mocking smile till he reached the alcove, when it suddenly vanished, and his face became pale and troubled. He seemed to have come within the range of some influence, which he could not resist, an influence he ascribed less to the veiled clairvoyante, than to a reminiscence in his own mind. But he was too much a man of the world to betray his agitation to the clairvoyante, and hence he addressed her in a bantering tone.

"Can you tell me how many wise men are in the company?"

"I am not conscious of the presence of any," replied the clairvoyante.

"Your second sight is very limited, to be so blind to merit. But you must be sensible of the presence of one wise woman, at least."

"There is no such being in nature."

"But there may be one *out* of nature, as we have proof in yourself. Can't you call spirits from the vasty deep?"

"You should test my powers."

"Then, you must raise your veil."

"I will raise the veil of the future—show what will happen to you in certain contingencies, and how you may avoid the danger."

"Pray don't go into anything so disagreeable. In fact, I had rather talk about you than myself; for you interest me deeply, and your conquest would be complete, if you would reveal your face."

"Beware that you are not conquered by one near at hand, whose power is greater than mine."

"Another wise woman!"

"Not overwise, but possessing the talisman of gold."

Harrifield gave a little start.

"You are in danger," continued the clairvoyante; "for you are in debt, and she offers you a present deliverance. But, remember, there is another mode of escape—harder, but which will be safer; and that is, the exercise of your talents. Stake everything but your hand and your independence."

"Very good advice, but coming from a suspicious quarter, if I am to believe you have dealings with the devil, and who else could make you so clever I can't conceive. Perhaps, you will enlighten me on this point."

"Let me rather enlighten you on your own prospects. To-morrow you will hear of an event which will open you a way to a great career: act as becomes you, and all your difficulties will disappear."

"You must really tell me whom I am indebted to for this counsel."

"I must first take off the ring I feel on your finger, and which exercises a baneful influence over me." Harrifield permitted her to remove the ring. "Ah! it is not

this : take it back !" And she slipped the ring on his finger again. "My lips are sealing. I can say no more."

Her voice seemed to fade away, it sank so imperceptibly, and, as the sound ceased, a spring loosed a curtain from above, closing the alcove, while Harrifield stood without. At the same moment, the music burst into a lively strain ; light flashed over the rooms, and the company all began to talk at once. Lady Clara paired them off to go in to supper, which was spread, in sumptuous style, in a room below. To the discomfiture of Mrs. Mockright and Jane, she charged Harrifield with the care of Annie, but they were consoled to see that the arrangement was not to his taste, for his thoughts were evidently astray, even while he kept up a conversation with his partner.

"Don't speak of the brilliancy of ladies' eyes, Mr. Harrifield," said Annie, in answer to one of his compliments, "when you wear such a brilliant ring."

Harrifield glanced at his finger, and was almost surprised into an exclamation. His

ring, a plain signet, had disappeared, and its place was occupied by a circlet of diamonds, which rose to his memory like a dream.

"By the way, where did Lady Clara pick up that little gipsy, the clairvoyante?" he said, carelessly.

"Ah! you must ask that question of herself," replied Annie. "But you won't get an audience to-night, I think."

"I am burning to know, of course, but I can restrain my curiosity till to-morrow," rejoined Harrifield.

And, in truth, he began to lose the impression in the fascination exercised over him by Annie, and which soon left no other influence in his breast.

CHAPTER XXIV.

INTERVENTION.

Harrifield's condition of mind in the morning warranted the belief that it was possible to be in love with two women at once. The clairvoyante's ring recalled a passion of his youth, which, in the absence of its object, might lack vitality, but asserted a sway over his memory. Indeed, it receded only before the actual presence of Annie. This deprived it of reality, refining it into a dream, or, rather, eclipsing it with Annie's living beauty and grace. The old love awoke tender regrets: the new kindled passionate ardour. Was the vacuum in his soul at last filled? He never paused to reflect; but, unstable as water, bounded

from one extreme to the other, and now thought of nothing but winning Annie.

The previous night had acquainted him with her real position, and, through the communicativeness of Mr. Mullet, he learnt that she was not Lady Clara's hired companion, but her friend, and the only child of the wealthy Mr. Blandford. He then drew no unfavourable augury from the little hoax that had been played upon him, and determined to make it a claim on Lady Clara, to obtain her support of his suit. The project of a marriage with Jane Mockright he utterly abandoned. Jessie shattered it with a touch, and in the allusions she made to his affairs, he saw, or fancied he saw, the aspect it would wear to the world. Yet, he did not perceive that he would appear equally mercenary in marrying Annie; and, certainly it was not her fortune that attracted him. He thought only of her beauty and engaging qualities, and these would eventually have brought him to her feet if she had been penniless.

It was in this frame of mind that he came

to Lady Clara, and disclosed his purpose, soliciting her good offices, while he told her, without disguise, the position of his affairs.

"What a thing to be so pushed for money," observed Lady Clara, most impressed by this part of his statement. "Shall I ask Mr. Mullet to lend you some, or would you like me to write to papa?"

The notion of getting money out of such a stone as Lord Bramblecourt amused Harrifield.

"No, no! I appreciate your kindness, but never mind about the money, thank you," he replied. "What I want, my cousin, is your advice in the more serious matter. Can you give me any encouragement?"

"As to Mr. Blandford, you mean?" said Lady Clara, diplomatically.

"Precisely."

"Well, he would like the connexion with our family, I am sure: and then, though you haven't much at present, he can't forget that you are the heir entail to his estate. But you had better have an explanation with him

at once, and hear what he says. Fortunately he is here."

"In this house?"

"Yes. He came down from town last night, but didn't present himself till this morning. He is now with Annie, in the drawing-room, and we can go to them if you like. I will contrive to leave you alone with Mr. Blandford."

But the prospect of going through his statement again with another person, and that person a stranger, dismayed Harrifield. He threw himself in a chair, in an attitude of exhaustion, and mused a moment.

"I'll tell you what I should like to do," he then said, "and it would solve all difficulties. I must get Annie to run away with me."

"Have you made so sure of her as that?" smiled Lady Clara.

"On the contrary, I am doubtful about her. Up to last night she refused to listen to me, and then she took all I said as of course, and as so much unmeaning compliment."

"That is a consequence of a bad character. You can't be a universal lover and a favoured one at the same time. Now don't make those grimaces, but resolve on a new course of life, and Annie will probably regard you more kindly."

"Then, you favour the running-away plan?"

"I! what are you thinking of? You know that I can countenance but one mode of proceeding, and that is the orthodox one. You must declare your intentions to Mr. Blandford before you see Annie again."

"You must declare them for me if it is to be done."

"A pretty thing indeed!" cried Lady Clara, laughing.

"You are the very person for it," pursued Harrifield. "I don't care what Mullet says; I am sure if you want to do anything practical, you must bring in a woman. A woman has a head on her shoulders. She mayn't know her own mind, but she knows everybody else's, and that shows much more ingenuity. The great Wellington asked how the

Queen's government was to be carried on; I answer, by a woman. So now go, like the cleverest woman and best cousin in the world, and dispatch this business for me."

"I really can't resist such logic," said Lady Clara. "Wait here a minute; and if I return with Mr. Blandford, you will understand that you have only to obtain the consent of Annie."

She left the room, but was not long absent. She had, indeed, with the intuition of her sex in such matters, foreseen Harrifield's proposal, and prepared Mr. Blandford for it, and the only question was whether he would be turned from the project by Harrifield's confession of poverty. Mr. Blandford was chatting with Annie when she appeared. Lady Clara sat a minute, and then asked Annie to play a piece of music, which enabled her to speak apart to Mr. Blandford, and fulfil the mission with which she had been charged. Mr. Blandford did not falter at her picture of Harrifield's affairs. On the contrary, he received the proposal with satisfaction, declared himself indebted to her

good offices, and signified his readiness to see Harrifield. Thus the way stood clear by the time Annie finished her piece of music.

"Very effectively played," said Mr. Blandford, caressingly laying his hand on her shoulder. "Your notes have expression, which is not often reached by non-professional performers, even when otherwise brilliant. I think, Lady Clara, we must leave her to practise a little."

"By all means," answered Lady Clara. "Resign yourself to the discipline for a short time, Annie, and then we will go out."

Annie smiled, but the smile faded as she found herself alone, and, instead of continuing her music, she fell into thought. The last twenty-four hours had expanded her view of things, and given a scope to her feelings, which hardly left her the same being as she was the day before. She suddenly awoke to the world of the drawing-room, where the observant eye detects an undercurrent of movements, embodying the deepest passions, and more is shown of cha-

racter in a flash, in an unguarded smile or look, than in years of busy life. Residents note these signs, and learn their import, whence it happens that a lady of fashion acquires an insight into human nature beyond that of a woman struggling in the world. Such was the art now caught by Annie—the art of small observation, and of putting this and that together. She perceived that the clairvoyante had discomposed both Jane Mockright and Alfred, and that a deeper impression had been made upon Harrifield, who did not recover his usual manner till the close of the evening. Moreover, her eye chanced to fall on his ring, just before he went up to the clairvoyante; at supper she saw this ring had given place to another; and she noticed Harrifield's start, when her remark on its brilliancy directed his glance to it. His instant reference to the clairvoyante, though he tried to make it appear accidental, thus became significant; it reminded her that Jessie had seemed to evade his recognition—first, by her seclusion, which prevented their ever

meeting, and then by the precautions of an obscured room and clever disguise. What could be the object of all this contrivance, and its accompaniments? Jessie pretended that it had no aim but to afford amusement to Lady Clara and her guests. But for the reasons mentioned, and from her behaviour since, she appeared to Annie to have some secret design, through which she aimed at Harrifield. Could it be that Harrifield was her early lover? Annie flushed at the conjecture. But other thoughts overbore it, and plunged her in reverie. She seemed to lose herself in this maze of reflections, carrying her hither and thither, awaking new feelings, almost prompting new aspirations, and enwrapping her like a dream. So she sat, her eyes curtained by their long fringe, and her face wearing its veil of sentiment, while the soul within disrobed itself in its speculations.

Jessie was meditating at the same moment under a wilder inspiration. On a pillow wet with tears, she had thought the whole

night of the few words she had exchanged with Harrifield, and her ear still thrilled with the tones of his voice. Impossible that she could ever give him up. The passion from which she fled in girlhood, now, in its revival—or rather its eruption from restraint, took complete possession of her. It had been curbed before by the timidity of innocence, but now it heeded no scruple, nor knew any—so masterful was it, and so absorbing. It woke from its seven years' sleep with a seven years' growth, nerved and invigorated, and grappling her whole being. The thought that it might never be requited, frenzied her, and in the paroxysm, her frame seemed a prison; and her spirit strained, as it were, to free itself, only recoiling before the bars. Not that she allowed herself to dwell on this view. Her nature was not hopeful—too inclined to despond, indeed; but it took refuge from this depression in her imagination. There she saw Harrifield again at her side, renewing his vows—there she anticipated the moment when she would stand as his bride

at the altar, and thought how she would feel as his wife—how devoted, how happy, moving in a heaven on earth! What heed would she give to the little vexations of life in such a paradise! Others might receive these as griefs, but to her they would be nothing; for she could have no care but love, and this love would make care itself a source of joy. Such pictures were her solace: they did not abstract her from the reality, but she conjured them up at intervals, and they had a cheering effect upon her, giving such a fillip as men derive from a dram. She remembered, indeed, that the goal was yet to be won, and could only be reached by persistence; and her mind was ever revolving the obstacles in the way, what they were, and how they were to be surmounted. Such was her occupation now. But she decided that she must keep Harrifield in sight, and for this purpose she resolved to make use of Ravel, and then act as circumstances might dictate.

She was thus musing, when she received a visit from her hostess. Lady Clara

was burning to report to somebody the event that had happened, an event so absorbing to ladies, and presaging that feminine triumph, a wedding. A declaration and proposal in one's own circle are not an everyday occurrence, even in London, and how much more must they interest out of town, and under one's own roof. Of course, there could be no harm in her telling Mr. Mullet, but fortunately he was out of reach, having early gone to his yacht. Lady Clara shrank from precipitating a disclosure to Annie, the person most concerned. In the first place, it would involve her in responsibility; secondly, it might do mischief; and finally, she thought it better to leave Annie to other hands. But she could have it out with Jessie, Annie's confidante, and one, therefore, to appreciate the communication, and realise its importance.

"I have news for you," she said, as she entered; "something your clairvoyance has not foreseen."

"That may easily be," answered Jessie,

with her ready smile; "so you mustn't ask me to make any guesses. I give it up."

"Well, what do you think of love and matrimony?"

"I think they are both good things in their way, and in moderation."

Lady Clara laughed. "Pray don't imagine that I have come to propose them to you," she said.

"That is a disappointment," returned Jessie. "I began to flatter myself that some gentle being had commissioned you to lay his hand and fortune at my feet. But this good luck has really fallen to somebody or other. If it is anyone I know, don't keep me in suspense, Lady Clara, or the point will probably drop out of my mind while we are talking about it."

"You won't feel so supremely indifferent when I tell you the proposal is to Annie."

"Certainly not, but neither do I feel surprise; for Annie is made for proposals. Who is the suitor?"

"Perhaps, you won't be surprised in his

case, either; for it is my kinsman, Charles Harrifield."

Jessie pressed her hand on her heart: it seemed to turn in her side, and she hardly felt conscious for a moment.

"What is the matter?" asked Lady Clara, anxiously. "You look ill."

But Jessie's smile came up again, though faintly. "A stitch in my side, catching my breath," she said. "So he has proposed to Annie?"

"*For* her. He is now talking it over with Mr. Blandford, who is very pleased about it; but he hasn't yet spoken seriously to Annie herself."

"Of course, she will accept him, though?" said Jessie, with an inquiring look.

"I should say so, but she is more confidential with you than with me," replied Lady Clara.

"Annie isn't confidential with anyone—she resembles her father in that; but she will probably tell me her sentiments when they are no secret."

"And then you can confide them to me,"

laughed Lady Clara. "But I recommend you to keep quiet a little, and by-and-bye I shall take you out for a drive. Now I must run up to the nursery for a few minutes, while I have time."

She went off, and Jessie was again alone —ah! how truly alone! She felt not only solitary, but desolate. The world seemed a grave, her bodily frame a coffin, and life a horrible sense of suffocation. She stood where she parted with Lady Clara—motionless, with her hands pressing her forehead, and all her faculties grasping the one fact; the fact that the lover of her youth had finally and for ever abandoned her. Wretched the man who is thus disappointed of the object of his passion; but far more wretched the woman, whom we reproach, indeed, with inconstancy, but whose love is the most enduring thing in nature. In Jessie it withstood abandonment and survived principle. She clung to the illusion, after she had lost hope, and now felt more than her first devotion. We may muse on a temptation until we are unable to resist it, and rush on, as if

we were under a spell or the attraction of a magnet. And after this manner Jessie yielded to her love. Her greatest pleasure was to lose herself in it—to view it in different aspects, and allow it to lead her into a labyrinth of thoughts and dreams and feelings, which, though she knew them to be strained, lured her on. But, as before remarked, this was the resource of idle moments: it did not occupy her now; for now she confronted reality. And yet the influence operated—the fumes of the moral opium kept her in a whirl. She saw, but defied the obstacles to her designs; and refused to recognise the facts. Let what would happen, or who might suffer, she would not give them up. At the worst, Annie and Harrifield were not yet married. She must plot, intrigue, and use every means —even crooked means, to prevent that consummation. And she began to think that the feelings that animated Harrifield could not be very deep, since only yesterday he was, according to Ravel, meditating a marriage with Jane Mockright. He might

be simply yielding to admiration of Annie's beauty, and, perhaps, she had herself helped this result, in the words she uttered as a clairvoyante. She had turned him from Jane to cast him at the feet of Annie. But the change, though it gave her a more formidable rival, need not be a discouragement; for it showed that she knew how to touch the fine instrument of his character. Love is called blind, but it is rather deluded: it sees, but ignores. No one knew Harrifield's weaknesses better than Jessie: ordinarily they were veiled by the robe of her love, but they peered forth now, when she might turn them to use—only she did not admit them to be blemishes.

She was growing calmer when her meditation was interrupted by a knock at the door. Her response brought in Burton, who presented a note, and lingered in the room while Jessie read it. Here it is:—

"Dear Miss Balcombe,

"I am summoned away by telegraph with Mr. Harrifield, but I hope to be per-

mitted to write you as soon as this business is over, remaining,

"Your devoted,

"Henry Ravel."

Jessie turned to Burton—"Is Mr. Harrifield still here, do you know?" she asked, carelessly.

"Yes, miss," answered Burton, with a simper. "He is with Mr. Blandford in the dining-room, and they have got it downstairs that he has come to propose for Miss Annie."

"Ah! I suppose they are always inventing some story or other, but I wish you wouldn't repeat such idle gossip, Burton, as Miss Blandford would be much annoyed if she knew it. Now don't begin again, as I want to hear nothing more."

Thus shut up, Burton thought it better to retire, and had no sooner gone than Jessie in great haste dressed herself for a walk. It had suddenly flashed upon her to take Annie out, and thus prevent a meeting between her and Harrifield, who, according to Ravel's note, must immediately leave

Folkestone: therefore, would not have another opportunity of declaring himself for some days. The interval might afford her an opening for more effectual action, and, at any rate, would be a gain of time. But she must carry off Annie at once, or she would be intercepted; and this apprehension gave such a spur to her movements, that she arrived in the drawing-room breathless.

Her entrance aroused Annie, who shook off her reverie, and went to meet her. This was an attention she often paid Jessie, but in a light girlish way, and Jessie was quick to perceive that her manner was now grave, and more affectionate than usual.

"How pale you are, Jessie!" she said. "Have you been walking, or are you only thinking of it?"

"Only thinking—for my going depends on my having your company."

"And that I shall be happy to guarantee. I am inclined to mope to-day, and a walk on the cliffs may lure me out of it."

"Not if you let the beauty of the morning pass, while you are getting ready."

"I promise to be very good in that respect. Wait here for me, and you shall acknowledge I can be quick."

"No, I will go with you, and see that you don't forget all about it."

So they went together to Annie's room. There Annie might have broken her pledge, only that Jessie both kept her moving and assisted her operations. Thus she was dragged through in an incredibly short time; and after twice turning back, on unknown pretences, was brought to descend the stairs. Jessie hardly ventured to breathe as they passed down. What if they should be met by Mr. Blandford and Harrifield! As the thought arose, she heard somebody in the hall, enquiring for Harrifield, and presently saw a man who proved to be his valet, and who brought him a telegraphic message from Lord Bramblecourt, and a verbal one from Ravel. The groom of the chambers, who had been listening at the dining-room door, and thus caught the purport of the conversation within, could not resist this pressure to intervene, and the room-

door opened as the ladies approached. They heard Harrifield's voice, and then came hurried steps, as if they must meet him as they passed. Fortunately Annie was silent, but Jessie could not stifle the penetrating rustle which denotes the vicinity of ladies; hence she took the next few steps in trepidation. But now the door was reached, and they passed out.

Not an instant too soon; for, as Jessie anticipated, the servant broke up the conference between Mr. Blandford and Harrifield, which was drawing to a close before. Harrifield handed Mr. Blandford the telegraphic message, which comprised these words—

"Lord Bramblecourt to Charles Harrifield.

"Sleepiman dead! Swashborough excited, and opposition threatened. Come, directly, with Ravel."

"This is very vexatious, and very inopportune," Harrifield said, "but I must go, I suppose. Have I your permission to speak to Miss Blandford first?"

"Undoubtedly," replied Mr. Blandford.

"I will go with you to the drawing-room, and leave you there with her."

But they were too late.

CHAPTER XXV.

SWASHBOROUGH.

Inquiry elicited that Annie had gone out with Jessie; so Harrifield, after lingering as long as he could, was obliged to depart unconfessed. Mr. Blandford took the matter with his usual serenity, though inwardly enraged, while it amused Lady Clara, who told Harrifield he would now comprehend that ladies were not to be kept waiting. But she whispered a word of encouragement at parting, at the same time loading him with messages for her father, and wishes for his success at Swashborough. Mr. Blandford, too, expressed an interest on this point, and begged that the Liberal cause might not lag for want of a thousand

pounds. Thus Harrifield set off in tolerable spirits.

He found Ravel at the Pavilion, but they deferred explanations, as there was barely time to save the train. Not till they were fairly on the road did they speak of business.

"I came to you early this morning, thinking to have an hour's talk with you," Ravel then said. "Unfortunately everything is pressing at once; and you must pardon me for saying your indecision stops the way. You either don't realise, or won't face your difficulties."

"My good friend, let us drop that subject," replied Harrifield. "You have worn it threadbare, and you can't think how disagreeable it is to me."

"Its being disagreeable won't rid you of it, Mr. Harrifield, and it is my duty to keep it before you. At the same time, if you will speak decisively about Miss Mockright—"

"Consider that all off," interrupted Harrifield. "The thing is impossible."

Ravel uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What, then, is possible?" he said. "Nothing! for all hinges on this arrangement; and you all but agreed to it. In fact, you have gone so far with the lady, that I don't see how you can withdraw."

"There you are mistaken. I have never said a word to her that could be construed into any intention."

"Pardon me again, but your conduct has evinced intentions, if your words haven't. Anyhow I find the family imbued with this belief to a greater extent than I expected; and, in the present position of your affairs, I dread the effect of my undeceiving Mr. Mockright—which, of course, I must do, immediately."

"That must be done at all hazards," concurred Harrifield; "for the truth is, I have proposed for another lady."

Ravel was silent.

"The match is in every way a more desirable one," continued Harrifield, by way of averting financial objections from his solicitor. "I am not justified in mentioning the lady at present, but I hope to be able to tell

you everything in a few days, as my proposal has already been accepted by her father."

"I can only trust that all your expectations will be fulfilled," replied Ravel, sullenly; "and I quite understand there is no more to be said at present."

Thus the conversation ended, and Harrifield dropped asleep, while Ravel fell into meditation. How was he to break Harrifield's defection to Mr. Mockright? That the millionnaire would be highly incensed, he felt sure, and the result might be injurious to himself, though he had done everything to forward the match. Indeed, he lamented that the double incentive of zeal for the house of Bramblecourt and personal greed had led him so far; and he resolved to eschew Harrifield's matrimonial projects, in future. In this mood he felt no curiosity as to the lady chosen, Harrifield's statement reassuring him on the only point he deemed of import—the money question. Strange to say, it never entered his head that the lady could be Annie, though he had once seen Harrifield under the influence of

Annie's attractions, and then dreaded the consequences.

In due time they arrived at Swashborough, where they were evidently expected, as a crowd had gathered round the station, and some members of the corporation waited on the platform. Harrifield's appearance was the signal for a cheer, which he had hardly time to acknowledge when he was accosted by Lord Bramblecourt's steward.

"My lord has sent a carriage for you, sir," he said, "and ordered me to give you this letter directly you arrived."

"Very good, Marlow," answered Harrifield, thrusting the letter in his pocket.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but—but it was my lord's wish you should read the letter at once."

Harrifield yawned. "Is that absolutely necessary?"

"I am afraid it is, sir," answered the steward, with a half smile.

Harrifield reluctantly opened the letter, and read these words:—

"Dear Charley,

"The excitement of this business has brought on the cursed gout, and you mustn't come here till it is all over, or you will throw me into a fever, and be elevated into the Upper House before you have served your time in the Lower. But you will be very well put up at the 'White Lion,' and you can have the use of my open carriage and greys. In case of a contest, Marlow has orders to evict anybody who won't give you his vote, but you should be prepared to spend a few pounds. I am sorry I can't help you in this way, but I am mowed up.

"I am, yours,

"Bramblecourt.

"The Castle, Wednesday."

Harrifield handed the letter to Ravel, who ran it over, but, remembering the presence of the steward, made no remark. Neither time nor place, indeed, favoured parley; for not only were all eyes turned on Harrifield, but he was now confronted by his friends of the corporation. These wor-

thies, after a polite greeting, escorted him to the station-yard, where they found the Bramblecourt carriage, drawn by four greys. The horses and postilions were bedizened with the liberal colours ; and the bystanders gave another cheer, as Harrifield pinned a yellow rosette on his breast, and then sprang in the carriage, followed by Ravel. Thus they drove off to the town.

"What do you think of this letter?" Harrifield now said.

"I own I don't like it," answered Ravel, guardedly. "Our being at the Castle would have looked better, in the event of a contest."

"But that would have put my lord to some expense, and you note what he says about money. You know he is famous for getting other people to pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

"Well, this is a family affair."

"I won't have it made *my* affair, at any rate," said Harrifield, with unusual determination, "and that you must go and tell him. I don't want the bother of being

Member for Swashborough, but here I am by his desire, and I am ready to go in for it —but it must be with the understanding that I am to be at no expense."

"Hadn't you better think it over a little. Hard as you are pushed, in such a case as this there are ways and means of raising the necessary funds."

"I don't doubt it. Indeed, I have been offered a thousand pounds myself, but I won't spend other people's money on Lord Bramblecourt's whims; and now that you know my resolution, pray don't bore me about it."

Here the carriage entered the town, where a flag floated from the tower of the church, and the bells pealed a welcome, while the denizens ran to their doors, or collected in the street, and echoed this greeting in cheers, dreaming that the candidate, whom they saw all smiles, was already meditating a retreat.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PARLIAMENTARY AGENT.

The Mockrights had returned to Surbiton, when a note from Ravel communicated the failure of his overture to Harrifield, and demolished their hopes of connexion with the peerage. The intelligence produced a different effect on the various members of the family. Jane was exasperated in the highest degree, and fell into a sort of rabid state, snarling and snapping at every-one who approached her. Ada, too, regretted the result, because it condemned her to a prolongation of Jane's domination. Alfred had discountenanced the project in the outset, but now felt mortified at the slight to his family; and he devoted

himself more resolutely to the object of attaining distinction in his profession, in order to wipe out what he called their trade-mark. On the other hand, Mrs. Mockright was glad to have escaped the yoke of nobility, her experience attesting that she would never be comfortable at such an elevation, and that, in point of fact, she was a much greater person as the richest woman in Surbiton. But the occurrence raised a bitter feeling in the breast of Mr. Mockright. In the first place, it touched his personal dignity; secondly, it set a barrier to the power of money, which he thought should be omnipotent; and, thirdly, he was so accustomed to success that he could not brook failure. It enraged him the more, as this great family had not been above dipping into his coffers; and he held their broad acres in pawn, while they looked upon him and his as inferior beings. How could he cross this gulf between him and greatness, which was not to be bridged by gold? There was but one mode: he must gain "position," which, indeed, he had for some

time estimated as highly as Mrs. Chowler, though from a different point of view. His conclusions pointed to a seat in the House of Commons.

Mr. Mockright communicated his wishes to a parliamentary agent, who heard, at the same moment, that the Conservative party at Swashborough were in search of a candidate. The party had been aroused to this step by an enterprising publican, who envied the supremacy of the "White Lion," and considered that an election ought to bring some money into the town, a proposition he no sooner mooted than it received the approval of both Conservatives and Liberals. But the greater part of the town belonged to Lord Bramblecourt, and where could they find a champion to face this Goliah, in his own intrenchments? Who would undertake to bell the cat? It was easy to put out flaring posters, announcing that a Conservative would come forward, but none appeared. Colonel Dashwood wished well to the movement, but declined to stand. Sir Ralph St. Maur re-

gretted that the state of his health prevented his responding to the flattering invitation, &c.; and, unable to find a candidate in the neighbourhood, the opposition finally resorted to London.

Mr. Mockright was, like the king of the nursery rhyme, sitting in his counting-house, counting out his money—or, in other words, looking over his banker's book, when a clerk brought in the card of Mr. Sloman, Parliamentary Agent. A word from Mr. Mockright brought in Mr. Sloman himself.

"You did me the honour, sir," said the agent, "to pay me a visit, about April last, or it may have been the end of March, but you can probably speak more precisely—"

"That is near enough for our purpose," observed Mr. Mockright.

"I think you will find it was the 28th or 29th of March," rejoined Mr. Sloman.

"Never mind when it was, sir," returned Mr. Mockright.

"Very well, sir. I say you did me the honour to pay me a visit, at the date considered immaterial, and confided to me a

wish on your part—a very natural wish in a gentleman of your large means, and consequent stake in the country—to enter the House of Commons;—in short, to stand for a borough."

"I perfectly remember our conversation."

"That is satisfactory, sir, because, in the first place, it enables us to dispense with explanations, which are apt to be misty after an interval of two months (you see I am assuming the date of the 28th or 29th of March, though we are agreed that this is immaterial); and, secondly, it affords us a starting-point. I have now to ascertain whether your intention is unchanged, as in that case I have an opportunity—in some respects a rare opportunity—of placing you in a position to fight a great constitutional battle, which may, and I hope will, end in your triumphant return. At the same time, I am bound to confess there are difficulties to be encountered."

"Is it a matter of money?" asked Mr. Mockright.

"There, sir, spoke one of our merchant

princes—one of those men who are the glory of England, who go into the House of Commons, and astonish us, absolutely astonish us, by their wrinkles in finance. Since you have put the question, and put it in a way so straightforward, and I may add statesmanlike, I shall be equally frank. It would, indeed, be inexcusable in me to leave you in the dark on this point, which is the very marrow of the business; for to say everything in a word—and that a word which you have, as it were, put into my mouth, it is a matter —of—money, and nothing else."

"Not for purposes of bribery, I hope. I won't bribe—that must be understood."

"Pardon me, sir, but you mustn't eye things too close; you mustn't, to use a homely phrase (and homely phrases are often very expressive)—you mustn't look a gift-horse in the mouth. In these cases, those who don't like bribery shut their eyes and open their pockets. There is bribery and bribery, sir. You are here called upon to fight, as I said, a great constitutional battle. You are solicited to contest Swashborough—"

"Swashborough!" exclaimed Mr. Mockright.

"Yes, sir, the pocket borough of Lord Bramblecourt. You are asked to oppose my Lord's nominee, Mr. Harrifield: you, a Conservative, are to enter this Radical hotbed, and make a struggle for the emancipation of the town; and considering that the town belongs to Lord Bramblecourt, and that nearly all the inhabitants are tenants at will, I say you mustn't face the thing, if you think about the expense."

"I never think about expense, sir. I'll stand for this place, and you may spend what you like; but not one shilling will I give as a bribe. I have lived to be sixty years of age without breaking the law, and, dang me, if I'll break it now. Give me your word on that point."

Mr. Sloman, from being constantly engaged in fencing before election committees, had acquired a circumlocutory style of conversation, but he could be brief on occasion, and he now simply answered—"*The law shall not be broken.*"

"There is a cheque, sir," said Mr. Mockright: "fill in the sum you require, and I will sign it."

And Mr. Sloman left the office with four thousand pounds in his pocket.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CANVASSING.

Great was the excitement of Swashborough when an address to the free and independent electors announced Mr. Mockright as a candidate for the borough, and solicited their suffrages in his behalf. At last, there was to be a contested election, and everybody began to consider how he could profit by the occasion. Two gentlemen competed for the honour of filling, without fee or reward, a laborious office which would keep the holder out of bed till the small hours for a great part of the year, and often employ him through the day—which involved the drudgery of an extensive correspondence, and, at the same time, imposed upon him the

guardianship of the interests of Swashborough, embodying every job and abuse its corporation of petty tradesmen could devise —which even presumed him to be at the service of every individual elector; and for the chances of success in this match the candidates were to pay their thousands. One yearning for loot seized not only every man and woman in Swashborough, but every institution and charity. The Literary Institute and the Mechanics Institute, the Infirmary and the Dispensary, the Schools, the Baths and Washhouses, and the Races Committee, the New Church Building Fund and the Old Church Restoration Fund, the Cricket Club, the Regatta Club, and the Working Men's Club, all sent in their claims. And Mr. Sloman, in the name of Mr. Mockright, made a liberal response. A donation of fifty pounds here, and twenty pounds there, twenty guineas, fifteen guineas, and ten at the lowest, attested Mr. Mockright's munificence, while fertilising every corner. So much for the institutions and charities. And a like bounty fell to the free and in-

dependent electors themselves. Committeemen received a pound a day for drinking a glass of brandy-and-water at the 'Spread Eagle,' fifteen shillings a day was paid to canvassers for soliciting the votes of their next-door neighbours, and their next-door neighbours obtained the same remuneration for returning the compliment. In short, Swashborough went to sleep a waste; and woke up to find itself a gold-digging.

Harrifield's indifference disappeared when he found that he was to be opposed by Mr. Mockright, and the same fact communicated a momentum to Lord Bramblecourt. His lordship had previously refused to see Ravel on his applying for an audience, but now summoned him to the castle. Harrifield, believing the meeting would be decisive, awaited the lawyer's return with some anxiety. He felt that there was vindictiveness in Mr. Mockright's opposition, that he could not leave him the field with honour, that there would be ignominy in being defeated by him, and that such a result would present him in an unfavourable light

both to Annie and her father. These several motives imbued him with a degree of vitality, such as he had not experienced for a long time, and he engaged in the business of the election, and began to warm to the fray.

He had just parted with a deputation on the Early Closing Movement, which pledged him never to shop after midnight, when Ravel returned from the castle.

"Well, what cheer?" he cried, as the lawyer seated himself: "is it to be, or not to be?"

"It rests with yourself, sir," answered Ravel.

"He will give nothing, then?—not to fight his own borough!"

"On the contrary, he will find the money, but we need something more—what you alone can give—to be of any avail, and that is energy!"

"You shall have nothing to complain of on that ground. But how on earth did you persuade him to open his purse?"

"Not by diplomacy, nor by using your threat of retreat. In fact, our cause was

won before I appeared, and we owe it to the circumstance of your opponent being Mockright. My lord looks upon Mockright's candidature as assuming that his mortgages give him a footing here, and as disputing possession with himself. I told him that your means wouldn't enable you to contend with Mockright, so that he must supply the cash, if he wished you to stand, and nobody but you would carry the family prestige. He stormed about it, as you may suppose, but finally gave in, swearing he would never see you again if you lost the day."

"He is making me anticipate this doom. Why can't he see me now? why hasn't he seen me hitherto?"

"Because he was afraid of your asking for money, and he is now enraged that he is obliged to give it. But he sends you some very good advice."

"When did anybody lose such an occasion for lecturing! Not but what his advice may, as you say, be very good; for no man knows the world better." Harrifield never disparaged the head of his house. "Let us

hear it, and I will accept it as the counsel of Achitophel."

"First," said Ravel, "he recommends that you should personally canvass the electors, making yourself as agreeable as possible; particularly to the women and children: secondly, he considers your address is not sufficiently liberal, and that you must make a greater point of the Working-Man; and, thirdly, he proposes to apply a pressure to shy electors, over and above Marlow's notices to quit, which you will naturally wish to know nothing about."

"The only thing I object to is the notices to quit," observed Harrifield. "However, we can see about all that afterwards. The point now is to win the election, and I know it isn't a time to be squeamish."

But the opposition entertained the same notion. On this point, the Yellows, indeed, could not take a step in advance of the Blues, nor the Blues of the Yellows. Harrifield canvassed the electors, but so did Mr. Mockright, and if Harrifield's grace and elegance won the ladies, Mr. Mockright's business air

impressed the men. Lord Bramblecourt's idea about the Working-Man occurred at the same moment to Mr. Sloman, and, the consequence was, a manifesto on the subject appeared simultaneously from both sides. Harrifield's hailed the Working-Man as a prophet, and Mr. Mockright's depicted him as an angel: the one pronounced him the palladium of the constitution, and the other saluted him as its regenerator. The contest kept the same pace on other points. Each party convened meetings, and Mr. Mockright explained his views on the Luxemburg guarantee to a sweep, while Harrifield pledged himself against the Irish Church to a butcher. In spite of the Bramblecourt screw, the town appeared equally divided; it became evident that the polling would be neck and neck, and all waited impatiently for the day of election.

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